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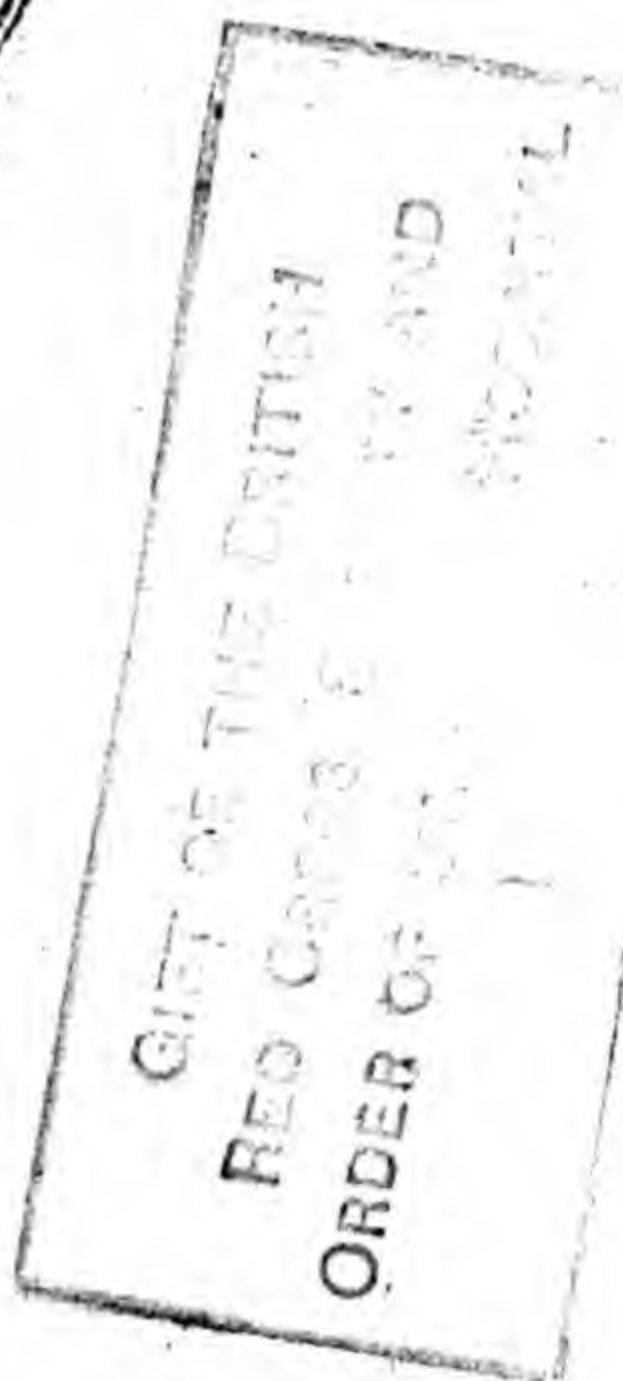
Services

THE BOWSTRING
MURDERS

Carter Dickson

Edition

THE BOWSTRING MURDERS



THE BOWSTRING MURDERS

By
CARTER DICKSON

SERVICES



EDITION

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CHAPTER I

BOWSTRING

IN the library at Bowstring, there is still a tall clock about which visitors are told a story. The clock is of German manufacture, and a round, smiling, yellow face used to revolve about the dial as the hours were struck. Moreover, there used to be a complicated series of chimes, and a mellow ticking; but the face ceased to turn, and the chimes to strike, on a certain night about two years ago. Not only did it mark the hours for Lord Rayle's death, but in a sense it watched over him after death—which is the reason why it is broken now. If you are a favoured visitor, they may show you the bullet-holes, though the blood has been washed off long ago.

Henry Steyne, that more than half-cracked holder of the Barony of Rayle, bought the clock himself. It was one of the newest things in his half-cracked house, though Lord Rayle had no liking for new things. On the contrary, he hated them. He was heir to one of the few remaining fifteenth-century castles which have not fallen to ruin or been rebuilt along Tudor lines. Bowstring, on the East Anglian coast, remains as a sort of private miracle. Had Lord Rayle been allowed his way completely, he would have kept its lighting and sanitation arrangements as primitive as its turrets and keep. For his whole heart—if he possessed one, which may be accounted as doubtful—was bound up in his collection of medieval arms and armour. His pride in it, of course, was justified; there was no finer private collection in the world. And it was necessary, if the armour hall at Bowstring were to be seen at its best, that there should be electric lights to show it off. But he used electricity as little as he could, and discouraged its use among his guests. He would switch on one small bulb in the vast and dusky reaches of the armour hall, which adjoined the library at Bowstring, and move among his treasures with a candle. In the library itself, candles would be burning in brass holders above the hood of the fireplace.

If Lord Rayle had been more sane in these matters, the whole story of his murder would have been different.

One wing of the castle was his particular domain. That queer little figure in the white robe, with its hurrying step, its peering eyes and uncertain temper, would come padding down the corridor from the Great Hall. It would pass the drawing-room on one side and the music-room on the other; but it would not stop until it reached the library. It might not stop there, save to flick down a book from one of the tall shelves, for its destination was always the armour hall. The great door would boom shut behind him. A draught might pass across the candles over the fireplace. Afterwards there would be only the deep ticking of the clock in the library, and the noise of the waterfall beyond the windows.

Now, it happened that on the afternoon of the tenth of September, 1931, two men sat in a first-class railway carriage on the train between London and Aldbridge, Suffolk; and they were discussing Lord Rayle. Or, rather, one of them was discussing him, and the other was trying to believe that such a fantastic person could exist. Sir George Anstruther spoke half-uncertainly, half-apologetically, leaning forward with a frown on his large red face, and tapping a heavy finger into his palm. Dr. Michael Tairlaine sat, fondling his greyish spike of beard with his half-closed eyes, brooding over the late summer loveliness of the English countryside. The sun was low; the wheels of the train sang with a drowsy rattling.

Sir George wheezed. "I'm taking you for a visit to Rayle," he said, "at your own risk. Don't blame me if you think he's mad. But Bowstring is another thing altogether. . . ." He seemed to grow restless, folding and unfolding his hands, and peering out of the window. "Of course, it's a dull place. But if you want golf, there's a good course at Aldbridge——"

"I don't want golf," said Tairlaine, without opening his eyes. "I'm on my sabbatical, and I don't want any social activities: especially golf. Besides, I know Aldbridge. They got me down there once on the Long Vac, when I was teaching at Cambridge."

George Anstruther nodded in his slow and genial fashion. He pushed his hat to the back of his big bald head, and grinned. Director of the British Museum, lecturer at Magdalene, this Sir George resembled less a scholar than a sort of cultured barman.

"Yes," he said. "I keep forgetting that. I also keep forgetting you're an American. I don't know whether it's the Harvard influence, because I don't know anything about Harvard; but you were much too reserved to teach at *our* Cambridge."

Tairlaine opened his eyes. "Damn you," he grunted, "I'm just getting old enough to resent that. Look here, George," he hesitated, "you've known me a good many years, and you're just now hitting on a secret fear. What *am* I, anyhow?"

"Lyman Mannot Professor of English Literature," said George, "at Har——"

"What pleasures have I ever got?" the tall, frail man demanded. "Why can't I dance and sing bawdy songs and play the rowdy like any sane human being? Did I ever have any childhood?—and now I'm old. It took me this sabbatical year to realise how old. And what sort of adventures did I ever have?"

"What *ho*!" said the other. "This is a new mood." He regarded his friend whimsically, and then grew serious. "All right; no ragging. Well, old Michael, what do you mean by 'adventures,' anyway? Do you mean in the grand manner? A slant-eyed adventuress, sables and all, who suddenly slips into this compartment, whispers, 'Six of diamonds—north tower at midnight—beware of Orloff!' and then . . . ?"

Tairlaine opened and shut his hands. He replied, with the utmost seriousness: "Yes, I suppose I did mean something like that."

The wheels of the train clicked against silence, and a chill dusk was coming on.

"I wonder," Sir George said slowly, "how you'd act if you ever did meet one. An adventure, I mean. Probably neither one of us would realise it anyway. They only exist in retrospect." But I'll tell you this . . ." In his own turn he hesitated uneasily. "My purpose in bringing you up

here wasn't altogether to show you Bowstring. Point of fact, I regarded you as level-headed. Look here, I may be wrong. But I think that sooner or later something mad and ugly and dangerous is going to blow up in that place. I warn you——!"

When he looked back on it afterwards, Tairlaine remembered the queer jump in his friend's voice. The one, even more than the words, made him forget his regret that he had admitted what staid people are not supposed to admit; and it set working his dry, curious, insatiable brain. He did not speak again, because the train was slowing down for Aldbridge Junction.

But he thought: I'm to be a barometer, eh? And, with George Anstruther's grave, common-sense words in his mind, he peered about him curiously as they alighted. It was a desolate little station, with a few stray dogs and the smell of the sea was in the moist grey air. Over against the station platform, a young man in an ulster sat mournfully on a milk-can and looked at them.

"Hallo!" called the young man. A little animation brightened his face when he saw Sir George, who was conspicuous in a bright tweed coat and a billycock hat with a feather. "Hallo!" he repeated. "I say, sir, I'm glad you're here. I never expected you on time, you know. I never expect anybody on time. I've got the trap waiting."

He shook the other's hand gratefully. Sir George said: "Francis, this is the expected guest: Dr. Tairlaine. Michael, Francis Steyne."

The young man turned. He had a faint, fair moustache, as indolent as his lean slouch, a fair ruddy complexion, lines of naïveté and good-humour round his mouth, and—surprisingly—rather old pale-blue eyes under heavy lids. His grip was muscular.

"No shootin' yet," he observed unhappily. "It's a week or two before the guns go out. . . . I say, sir, it's jolly good of you to run up with Sir George. He's always a bright influence. I mean to say—games. He teaches us games. You put out the lights and yell, or something. Otherwise than Hunt the Slipper, there's nothing to do at our place."

Sir George yanked down his loud hat. "Humph! Nonsense!" he said. "Books. Young man——"

"Edgar Wallace," Francis said gloomily. "Over and over. Tons of him. He's the only one I can understand. I've read the same story so often that I don't have to think about what's coming. . . . Hallo, Masters!" he added to a tall man who was rounding up the luggage. "Stow it away in the trap, will you? Mind walking back? Thanks. What was I saying?"

Swivelling round his shrewd little eye, Sir George wheezed with impatience. He snapped:

"Stop trying to talk like a damned idiot in a comic paper! You never fool anybody. And you won't fool Dr. Tairlaine. He's a don."

"Word of honour!" said Francis, lifting his eyebrows. He checked himself, and glanced with something like interest at Tairlaine. "Are you, sir? I say, that's good!—I had a shot at going up myself once, you know. They wanted to let me in. Good God, yes. The examiners tried everything to let me in without hurting their consciences. . . . Here's the trap; mind that step. . . ."

"And did you get in?" asked Tairlaine.

"No, worse luck. . . . Tch-tch-tch; *gee-up*—damn the horse, anyway!—ah! No, in spite of them. They said they'd ask me two questions; and if I answered one of them—fifty per cent., you see—they'd pass me. Well, the first question was some Christ-awful thing they couldn't have answered themselves. You know, like those history examinations in school: 'Well, boys, give a short history of the world in one example.' And the other question was, 'Who is your favourite musician?' I'm afraid I failed, you know. I was going to answer, 'Tennyson,' but I couldn't remember how you spelled his name. . . . Have you got any new games, Sir George?"

"No," the other growled. He was piled into one corner of the trap like a gaudy piece of luggage, trying to draw a spark into his pipe. "And stop talking rubbish. How are your people?"

"Oh, the same. Quite all right. Mother's had a bit of a headache, and we've got young Larry Kestevan staying with us. . . . I say, sir"—he turned those heavy, slow, puzzled eyes towards Tairlaine—"I hope Sir George has warned you about my governor. You mustn't be surprised.

He's a very decent sort, and tremendously scholarly, and all that, but . . . well, I get it from him, d'ye see. Not quite—I mean to say, he goes about in a sort of white robe, with a hood on it, and sometimes he's a bit difficult to talk to. Eh?"

"He'll understand," said the baronet.

The rhythmic, drowsy clop of hoofs ran on like the current of Francis's voice. The salt breeze had strengthened. Distantly, across a roll in the uplands, they could see a golf course where small dots moved; then the shelving line of the beach, and the slate sea. It was silent, and living, and mysterious. They heard its drag and thunder, as dim as the roar inside a conch-shell.

Clop-clop, clop-clop. It was as though every flick of the horse's shoe lifted the trap with the jogging. Lights were going on in what seemed to be a hotel by the beach. Turning up his overcoat against the chill, Tairlaine tried to study the young-old face of the man driving them, whenever—as occurred frequently—he turned his head for some inconsequential remark. Dull, sardonic, eager, bored? It was impossible to tell. Often Francis would flourish his whip; once he expressed a desire to enact the role of Ben-Hur in the motion pictures.

"Larry Kestevan, now," he confided, "*he's* in the films. All the best people are doing it nowadays, you know. Larry's got all the best points of G.B.S. and Mickey Mouse. Besides, he's handsome as sin, the women tell me, because he can look surlier than any player at Elstree. That's it, you see. You must be surly. In the old days, the hero showed his virility by punching the villain's head. Nowadays he shows it by punching the heroine. Masculinity's high peak. What ho!"

Another flourish of the whip. He threw back his head and uttered one of those whinnies of laughter which (Tairlaine was to notice later) were startlingly reminiscent of his father.

The doctor said politely: "You don't seem very amiably inclined towards this Mr. Kestevan."

"Oh, come?" Francis switched round with a sort of amazement, and then looked hurt. "Tch-tch-tch, *gee-up!*—Oh, loo' here, that's not true. He's a very decent sort.

And didn't I say he was in the films? Good God, I mean to say, what an opportunity. Wouldn't you like to be in the films? Wouldn't *anybody*?" His fresh-coloured face glowed with enthusiasm. "Fancy yourself dressed up as an officer in the Foreign Legion. Or as Ben-Hur. 'Scum of the galleys! I will grind you in the dust before all Antioch.' By Jove!"

Tairlaine thought: This young man has an extraordinary habit of saying things which everybody thinks and nobody admits. Glancing towards his left, he saw now some distance ahead a sweep of rolling parkland. Towers, turning purple with dusk, were printed on the mottled sky above the trees.

Francis pointed with his whip. His lips framed: "Bowstring."

They were all silent. With a flourish, the trap whisked through stone gate-posts, and the horse-hoofs padded sharply on gravel.

"As a matter of fact," Francis was prattling on cheerfully, "a film company wanted to use our place to put on some epic or other. I thought it would be jolly good fun to see all the chaps falling off the wall. They even wanted to use the old man's armour—he's got acres of it, you know; at least fifty or so complete suits, and no end of weapons, all in one room. But the old man wouldn't hear of it. By the way," he looked at Sir George, "we've been having a bit of a row recently, sir. It's quite funny. One of the maids."

Tairlaine thought that Sir George stared straight ahead of him abruptly, for a moment, before he raised his eyes. But it was dark under the winding avenue of oaks, and the doctor could not be sure.

"Eh?" demanded Sir George. "What about one of the maids?"

"It's Doris. She's from Somerset; pretty little thing, but superstitious as the devil, the way they all are in the west country. She told me once that if you looked in a mirror in the dark you could see the devil behind you." Francis chuckled. He had wound the reins around the whipstock and was skewered round to face them, his eyebrows raised and a quizzical expression in his face; Tairlaine thought that he looked like a leering schoolmaster, lecturing them as

the trap pattered up the dark avenue of oaks. "Hah!" said Francis. "She got a turn."

"How?"

"Well, you see, she thought she saw one of the suits of armour standing in the middle of the staircase, where it had no business to be. What ho."

Sir George looked at him. Then he nestled the folds of his face into his collar.

"Well, well," he said. "That's very interesting. What was it doing?"

"Nothing. It was just standing there looking at her, she said. She was most upset. Of course it wasn't, really, but she said she could see the long points on the fingers of a gauntlet, like finger-nails."

For some reason the bald description etched out itself in Tairlaine's brain, as though it were done by those sharp steel points.

"Does Bowstring by any chance possess a ghost, Mr. Steyne?" he asked suddenly.

"I'm sorry," the other replied, almost with contrition. "That's the devil of it. Not a ghost. It's damned unenterprising of them, don't you think, not to manufacture one in five hundred years? My old man will give you the details of the place, if you like. . . . But, I say. It's a funny thing."

"Well, get on with it," Sir George said wearily, as the other paused with a confidential air.

"I looked at the stair-rail, you know. The big one, at the end of the Great Hall?—the one that has a hand-rail about a foot wide?"

"Yes."

"I'll show you," answered Francis, nodding sagely. "Wait. Then, when somebody pinched the bowstring . . ."

"*What bowstring?*" demanded Sir George, sitting up straight and wheezing.

"Ah-ha. This must be gibberish to you, sir," Francis broke off, turning to Tairlaine. "You see, the old man has one particular room—it must be ninety feet long, and runs up two stories, and colder than the devil, too—well, that's where he keeps his armour pieces; you see? In glass cases and things, really. It's a museum, really. A chap from the B.M. asked him to arrange it. On the left-hand side

as you go in, over near the wall, there are a couple of glass cases full of crossbows. You know. Funny doohickies. You take a thing called a *cric*, and put it over the cord on the bow, and turn a crank till you've pulled back the cord so that it catches in a little revolving nut about the middle of the stock, and then . . . I say," he frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose, "where was I?"

"You were mentioning a revolving nut," growled Sir George, "but please don't go on. We understand." He scowled. "Incidentally that's a much earlier and rarer type than the stirrup crossbow, with the windlass on the stock. Your father's specimens are complete originals, including the cords. What happened?"

"Somebody got into the case. It's never locked, you know; none of 'em are. Whoof!" said Francis, sweeping out an arm expressively. "Pinched."

"You mean somebody took the cord off?"

"Right you are. Whatever *for*, d'ye think? But, look here, it didn't matter, you see. I told him so. He knew it, anyway. Because that cord wasn't an original. It used to be. But when I was a kid, I always wanted to see how the things worked. I wanted to shoot holes in windows—don't you like breaking windows? I do. Yes, and shooting people in the seat of the trousers, the way they do in the films. Which reminds me, speaking of the films——"

"Get on with it!" interrupted Sir George. "About the crossbow."

"The . . . oh, yes. Yes, of course. Well, I stole the crossbow and tried to work it, but the cord was entirely rotten. Just a little pressure, and *bing*, it snapped. The old man was wild. He nearly killed me. Anyhow, they replaced the cord with a new one, a good strong twentieth-century one, so it doesn't really matter about its being stolen now, does it?"

Glancing at Sir George in the thickening twilight, Tairlaine thought he could see the heavy mouth being pulled slowly down, and rolls of fat obscuring his eyes. His breath was so slow that it barely turned to smoke in the sharp air. But for some time Tairlaine had been conscious of a new noise above the trap's rattle: faint, rushing, growing louder in musical falling. . . .

"That's our waterfall," Francis informed him, as he saw the doctor looking about. "The old man was very insistent on keeping the moat. But you can't, you know, on sanitary grounds. It gets stagnant—gnats and midges and mosquitoes and things, and you get fever. I wonder how they stood it in the old days. There was a large stream on our property; so he got some irrigation experts to turn it and dam it and curry it, and whatever it is they do. And now it falls down a sort of gorge and joins the moat, and we have clear water all the time. Clever."

Whirling his long legs over the seat again, he caught up the reins and flicked them across the horse's back. The trap spanked round another curve, while the roar of the waterfall deepened, and the lights of Bowstring appeared in patterns against the oaks. As they approached in the dusk, Tairlaine could make out only a little. He could see the stone parapet of a moat, and a causeway leading to the gates. On either side there were two slender round-towers, not much taller than the forty-foot height of the walls. Their slits of windows were unilluminated but the walls were picked out with pointed windows glowing yellow against a tapestry of branches. Standing out black on a grey-shot sky, the battlements marched away to two high round-towers at either end of the façade, and ranks of chimney-stacks were built up in tiers against the dull reddish tiles of the roofs. Far at the rear, a flagstaff rose from the battlements of a donjon-keep.

The spanking trap whirled into the curve. Francis cried, "Hallo!" and, incongruously, a large white electric globe glowed out over the gates.

"The old man," Francis explained, "didn't want electric light. But he had to give in as a concession to the rest of us. . . . Gad, I'm frozen. We all need a whisky. Ah. What ho, there!—Get these bags!"

Two footmen were coming out as the great doors opened. One of them gathered up the luggage, and the other drove the trap round the side of the castle towards the stables. Tairlaine found himself beating his hands together and shivering. They crossed the causeway above hissing water; the gates in the wall opened on a long and narrow cobbled courtyard, the actual front of the castle running parallel with the outer wall. Only a scattered number of lighted

windows had been visible from the driveway, because the wall cut them off, but this whole court was illuminated with welcoming glare. A balustraded terrace with a few shallow steps ran up to the open front door. Tinted with arms in the centre of the glass, the windows brightened inside walls which, Tairlaine thought, must be more than eight feet thick. Peering about, he could see stairs leading to the battlements of the outer wall; the grim brutish curve of the fighting-towers. But there was little time to see this. Conducted across the threshold, he stopped short, and almost stared.

A neighing voice arrested him. In the middle of Bowstring's Great Hall, a very small, stooped man in a very dirty white robe was hopping about and shaking a hammer in the air. Since he was hopping on his toes, he resembled even more a performing goat. He was crying:

"I want my gauntlets, do you hear? I want my gauntlets!"

CHAPTER II

THE MISSING GAUNTLETS

"SOMETHING mad and ugly and dangerous"—that was what George had said. The words came back to Tairlaine in the Great Hall at Bowstring. George, fat and wheezing, his hands on his knees and his face poked forward with earnestness, against the grey upholstery of the compartment. . . .

But not a sheer absurdity. It struck him with a curious sense of unreality now. In the brief moment while he could not help staring at Lord Rayle, Tairlaine remembered a class-room: the sloping tiers of seats, and himself placing a watch with meticulous straightness on the table. He always fiddled with that watch while he lectured. He talked at the bright windows beyond the class; he seldom knew or cared if the class were listening, provided he could cut his own words into their precise and agonised pattern. His subject was "The Tale of Terror." And always he had rather prided himself on his handling of that tricky subject-matter. . . .

The basis of all terror, he had maintained, was the

grotesque. That sentence stood out among a welter of famous examples. Yet here he saw a sight which, God knew, was grotesque; and its impression on him was to make him feel embarrassed. It was at least a trifle unusual to discover a peer of the realm before him indulging in such antics and calling loudly for a pair of gauntlets.

Then, as Lord Rayle whirled round at the interruption, several tenpenny nails dropped out of a rent in his pocket and tinkled on the stone floor. The old man hopped down to pick them up before he faced them again.

The person he was berating stood flustered and embarrassed as he noticed newcomers. He was a young man, short and stocky, with excellent but not new clothes, and he was making aimless gestures with a leather brief-case. He had a round face, a dark half-moon moustache curving down the sides of his mouth, half-moon eyebrows, and blank bewildered eyes which seemed always to be regarding the corner of some table. His black thinning hair had straggled down a little with the exertion of facing Lord Rayle. He mopped his forehead, he gestured, and he seemed to be making noises which in a less well-bred man would have become audible as "Pss-ss-t!"

Shaking a skinny arm out of his voluminous sleeve, the man with the grey and goat-bearded face pounced on him again. His thin voice rose querulously.

"I won't put up with it!" he announced. "I'm damned if I'll put up with it. I want my gauntlets. First that bowstring, and now my best Gothic pair. Where are they? What did you do with them? I want to know!"

"Please, sir!" the other urged, making gestures. He tried to talk in a low voice. "If you don't mind—visitors——"

"Visitors or no visitors," neighed Lord Rayle. "I want my gauntlets! It's an outrage, that's what it is; an outrage! Where are they?"

"I tell you, sir, I haven't got your gauntlets! I don't know where they are. How should I know? I am not respon——"

"That," said Lord Rayle, poking him in the chest with the pounce of one who clinches an argument, "that doesn't in the least alter the principle of the thing. You're my secretary, aren't you? You don't deny that, do you?"

"No, sir; of course not."

"Ah-ha. You don't deny it. Then you ought to know. If you're my secretary you ought to know. . . . Oughtn't he?" Lord Rayle demanded, turning to the rest.

"For God's sake, Henry," said Sir George, "stop talking like Alice in Wonderland and remember that you have a guest. Come out of it, man. Now tell us what's the matter."

They were interrupted by Francis Steyne. He had pulled off a disreputable hat and thrust it into the pocket of his ulster. He was lighting a cigarette, and there were wrinkles of thoughtful interest in his forehead as he spoke through the smoke.

"I say, governor, there's a cobweb hanging from your ear. How the devil did you ever contrive to get so dirty? It's rather a masterpiece. And why the hammer?"

Lord Rayle had been peering at them, his head slightly on one side, in aggrieved appeal for support. There was a smear of dirt down his hooked nose, and he seemed to be trying to cross his eyes so that he could see it. Though he looked much heavier in the white-wool monk's robe, with the cowl flopping behind his sparse grey-white hair, he could not have weighed more than seven stone. He blinked. Now he glanced stupidly at the hammer in his hand, examining it. An expression of extreme pleasure was succeeded by one of cunning.

"They mustn't know about this," he explained hurriedly, thrusting the hammer into his pocket. "No, no. That would spoil the joke. Ha. I say, devil take my body, but it's funny! Ha, ha." He cackled and slapped his side. "Not a word about this, now, from anybody. Do you hear?"

"Not a word about *what*?" demanded Sir George.

Lord Rayle peered at Tairlaine. "Who's that?" he inquired suddenly.

"This is Dr. Tairlaine, your guest, Henry. Do you remember?"

"Oh, ah—yes! Yes, of course!" cried the other, crowing. "Yes, yes, the professor. Delighted, sir, delighted, I'm sure. I want your opinion on a Franco-Flemish tapestry of mine. It's a Tournai. Salton says it's earlier than mid-fifteenth-century, but I know better. It's 1470

if it's a year. Salton's an old fool, like all Oxford people. Isn't he?"

"I'm afraid, sir, that I——"

"Of course he is. Ha!" snorted Lord Rayle, blowing through his lips. "You're a man of sound sense, sir. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. Delighted. . . . Oh, I say!" he broke off. "I've got to have a wash. They mustn't see me. They mustn't know, eh? Certainly not. Excuse me. Excuse me. Bruce," he indicated his secretary as he began hurrying away, "will show you about. Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!"

"Excuse me, sir," the secretary put in quickly, and snapped at the catch of his brief-case; "I've been trying to ask you all day—there are some letters——"

Lord Rayle waved his hand. "In the den. Not now. In the den."

"But when, sir?"

"In the den," said Lord Rayle. "Or the office," he added over his shoulder as he hurried away.

Tairlaine thought he saw the secretary's lips frame, "Oh, God," a sag of his shoulders, and that baffled, tired, blank expression on the half-moon face which comes to those who constantly and patiently handle a capricious toper. Bruce Massey snapped shut the catch of his brief-case.

Francis grinned. He said:

"You're much too conscientious, Bruce. If you took it easy, you'd have the softest secretarial job in England."

"If I did," said Massey gloomily, "we should be in enough law-suits to paralyse the legal system in a fortnight. Excuse me." He scratched the side of his head with his brief-case. "Your father's idea of a courteous business-letter is to call his bank-manager a bloody thief, and when he gets into an academic controversy . . . my God." He was saying, Tairlaine sensed, more than he usually did; his stolidity was wearing thin. "He changes the combination of the safe every six months, and then writes it on the wall beside the safe so that he won't forget it. Every time I rub it out, he asks me what it is, and writes it up again. I tried giving him the wrong numbers, but he found out and I almost got the sack. I used to have a sense of humour," Massey added despondently. "It's gone."

"Well, there you are," said Francis, shrugging as he regarded Tairlaine; "I warned you, sir. But look here, Bruce, what was he really doing with the hammer and nails?"

The secretary's forehead wrinkled. "He said he was making a rabbit-hutch. Those nails were large enough to secure a tiger-crate. I don't know. Aside from the fact that it wasn't a rabbit-hutch, I haven't the slightest idea." He became efficient. "I say, excuse me, gentlemen. You'll be wanting to go to your rooms. . . . Wood . . . !"

Before him Tairlaine saw the immense hall, a hundred feet square and over fifty feet high, he judged it; a fretted Gothic arch of a roof with carven beams, from which hung banners faded and dry. It was paved in flagstones smoothly worn, and three vast fireplaces filled its dampness with the tang of burning pine-logs. All around, its walls were panelled high in carven oak; and above the panelling white-washed plaster. Weapon-groups hung black against the dingy white: halberds, guisarmes, and bills, crossed behind heavy kite-shaped shields. There were many of them, because in height the Hall occupied the two full storeys of the house.

At the rear, a great oaken staircase extended half-way up the wall, to an arched door giving on a gallery beyond this wall, leading to the rooms on the regular second floor. Through this door Tairlaine could see the dull colours of portraits by the pin-points of candles in wall brackets along the gallery. There must be, he thought, a courtyard behind the Great Hall; on either side of the staircase rose three Romanesque windows of the thirteenth-century French school, blue and violet diamond-designs woven against red-paned glass.

This much he could only note. A butler, whom he had not noticed at their entrance, brought glasses, a syphon, and a decanter of whisky. They stood before one stone cavern of a fireplace, winking at the great blaze. Beneath his feet Tairlaine felt the warmth of fur hearth-rugs, and the warmth of whisky crawled pleasantly along his veins. He found himself watching the light on the antlers above the fireplace; the trident and boar-spear, whose discolourations seemed less like rust than blood.

Massey, whose apparently absent eye missed nothing, said:

"These are very ordinary things, Dr. Tairlaine. You must see the armour hall." He nodded his head round slowly. "All this has been remodelled, of course. The whole house has; it's quite modern. Over there"—he indicated the wall at the right as you faced the staircase—"is the dining-hall."

Tairlaine sat down with comfortable relaxation in a high-backed chair.

"Where is the armour hall?"

"On the other side of the castle, at the rear. That"—he pointed his glass to a door in the wall at the left as you faced the staircase, and almost at right-angles to the rear wall itself—"that is a corridor running between the music-room and the drawing-room. The drawing-room is directly opposite the dining-hall there. That corridor goes to the library, and the library communicates with the armour . . . never mind."

He was going on in his earnest fashion, describing things with motions of his hands as though he never expected his auditor to see them; but he checked himself with a rather annoyed expression when he saw Francis's pale smile, and added:

"But you gentlemen will want a wash now." He nodded to the butler. "Wood here will show you upstairs. We've put you in the Abbot's Room, Sir George, as usual; and you in the Blue Room, Dr. Tairlaine, opposite Mr. Kestevan. If you'll come down before dinner, I can show you about a bit."

And that was all? That was all, Tairlaine thought, when he sat relaxed to sip the last good drop of his whisky before going into those daughty passages upstairs. No. Something disturbing suddenly came into the circle of firelight in the Great Hall, as palpably as though a figure had sat down there. Francis, who seemed less to sit in a chair than to become entangled in it, leaned forward with a cigarette held close against his chest; its smoke drifted up past heavy-lidded blue eyes which were fixed on Massey.

He said: "Look here, Bruce, what's all this about a pair of gauntlets being stolen?"

"Oh, God knows," the other replied wearily. "I'm not worried. He mislays things every day, and always blames me for taking them. Then, when he does find them, he won't admit it for a week, and raises the devil because he has to admit it eventually. . . . He probably took those gauntlets out to polish the steel; he won't let anybody else attend to it."

Sir George spoke suddenly. He had been blinking owlishly at the fire, which turned his face and bald head even redder. He said:

"That's entirely possible. Yes, entirely possible. It's very like him." Pressing a hand over his eyes, he muttered: "I'm getting to be a damned old woman. That's bad. What sort of gauntlets were they, Bruce?"

"A good pair. They were that 1500 Gothic, with the long cuff, in the separate case. I only hope they're not lost for good."

"Then they had fingers in them," Sir George said, taking his hand away. "I was hoping they were *mitons*."

Rising, he emptied his glass and beckoned Wood to take them upstairs. Tairlaine was rising too when he heard steps on the stone floor, quick and light: a woman's steps. He did not turn. At the moment he happened to be looking at Francis, who wore his usual drooping and unnecessary smile; but the smile slipped. The cigarette also slipped between his fingers, so that he had to move his wrist quickly to keep it there.

"Frank"—a woman's voice said, "Frank——" Tairlaine turned.

She gave the impression of beauty, whether she was actually beautiful or not: of beauty, fragility, and a certain hesitant air which went with both. Not more than nineteen or twenty, Tairlaine thought. Her darkish yellow hair was cropped close, but it conveyed no suggestion of the masculine; rather, it heightened the curves and softness of her face. Not quite a mature face, with dark blue, very luminous and searching eyes under arched, surprised brows. Her nose was slightly turned up, and her lips somewhat too full for the rest of the countenance. But all these things made for beauty, against a fair skin where the blood showed easily. She wore some sort of dark frock, with a large collar

which suggested Eton, and she looked from one to the other of them.

Incidentally, the girl was frightened. This breathlessness was no part of her. Tairlaine saw her hand tremble when she put it on the back of a chair.

"Frank——" she repeated hesitantly.

"——my sister Patricia, Dr. Tairlaine," Francis was droning. "You know old Sir George. I say, Pat, what——?"

"I'm a beast to break in on you," she said hurriedly, in that light and very pleasant voice, "but, Frank, you must; do send Saunders or somebody to Aldbridge for Dr. Manning. Hurry!"

Francis, without turning towards the fire, threw his cigarette backwards at it. He missed.

"She's had a spell or something," Patricia hurried on, "and she's very ill, and Mrs. Carter is upset and saying dreadful things, and——"

"Steady," her brother interrupted. "*Who?*"

"One of the maids. You know. Doris."

"Damn," said Sir George. He spoke so low that Tairlaine barely heard him, and he hastily began to fill his pipe.

Francis's voice rose, light, cheerful, almost inane:

"Not seeing any more ghosts, is she, Pat?"

"Oh, *please* be serious! This is really serious. I tried to find out about it when they called me. It seems they were ragging her about something—it was probably that—and she got hysterical out in the servants' hall, and threw a dish at Annie. Then she wept, and fell down on the floor in more hysterics, and then she was really ill so that they had to carry her upstairs, so . . ." Her voice would go no further, and she looked imploringly at her brother.

"Righto," the other assented. "No, never mind, Wood; I'll find Saunders or Lee myself. Carry on."

Undoubtedly the designers and electricians who had renovated Bowstring did their best in the matter of skilful, congruous lighting for the Great Hall. But only the naked glare of many lamps could fully have lighted it. Therefore Tairlaine saw something which he might not otherwise have noticed. It struck his fancy rather than his reason; the

pictures were growing cloudy, weird, and inexplicably sinister.

Down the Hall, where the broad staircase with its dull red carpet ascended to the gallery, the place was shadowed. In this half-light the war-trophies against the wall looked like flattened spiders. Curiously, the great arched door to the gallery at the top of the stairs, illuminated by those bracketed candles, was much brighter than the rest of the room. It glowed like a stage-box. And Tairlaine saw a silhouette there.

It was a man standing motionless, just at the edge of the door, framed against the line of portraits. Tairlaine got the impression that he was listening. With these sharp colours, it was something medieval; a flash caught out of the castle's past, or a gilt and rich-hued manuscript. The American started a little as he regarded it. Then he realised that only because this figure had a smooth and heavy head of hair did he seem to be wearing a helmet.

CHAPTER III

SOMETHING MAD, AND UGLY, AND DANGEROUS

"DORIS is going to have a baby," said Lord Rayle. "Ha."

When afterwards Tairlaine tried to remember the expressions of those at the dinner-table as the host made this sudden declaration, he could find nothing definite. A crystal wineglass skittered in somebody's hand, clinked against a plate, and was retrieved. But beyond the shock which went round—at good taste blatantly outraged, such as you might have at any well-corseted British table—little more was apparent.

Rayle's high, argumentative voice squeaked above the sudden hush. There he was, with the soiled monk's robe over his dinner-coat, leering about the white napery which bore so many candles that they seemed to be sitting in a church rather than a dining-room. The vast candle-blaze wavered in cross draughts. Heretofore the little host had been screwed up in his chair, gesticulating, complaining of

the food, talking shrilly and insistently without waiting for answers. He had just finished a cheerful discourse on the subject of the medieval chastity-belt, going so thoroughly into detail that Patricia grew red in the face and the stolid Massey fidgeted. Then he leaned forward abruptly, his palms flat on the table. Every time he seemed intent, he looked a bit cross-eyed, and his little malevolent eye gleamed like a crumb of glass.

"Doris is going to have a baby," he said. "Ha!"

Instinctively Tairlaine was aware of what the rest of them knew: it was useless to try to bridge the remark with silence, or speak smoothly of other subjects. The old goat would never be diverted. So Francis murmured, "What ho!" and whistled.

Tairlaine was looking at Mr. Lawrence Kestevan. The latter, whom he had met taking a drink off the sideboard in the library before dinner, was impassive. But then he was always impassive: it was one of those things which so irritated men and fascinated women. His woodenish face, too flat in the nose to be called actually handsome, tried to express its ideas by means of eyebrows and the movement of large nostrils. Large eyes, of the sort which are described by swooning women-novelists as "liquid," were set in a dark meaningless glaze. The mouth in the swarthy face was straight, as straight as the line of his thick, dark, glossy hair. Since his film public had repeatedly flattered him by telling him he looked like a gangster, he tried to speak with rather a startling imitation of an American accent. He intoned:

"Too bad." His mouth scarcely opened at all.

What Patricia thought of him was quite apparent. Tairlaine had noticed it in the drawing-room, where they had congregated before dinner. Kestevan had come in with a self-assured, unhurried walk, his dinner-coat rising to peaks at the shoulders, and his finger-nails trimmed to sharp points. Patricia had seen him then, it was obvious: the changing expression of her eyes, quickly veiled by an indifference so painfully apparent that it was like somebody posing for a photograph.

And now here they were, going through a meal whose undercurrents were dangerous, and only half felt. The only

person absent was Lady Rayle, whom Tairlaine had not yet seen. As usual, it was Bruce Massey who had made the apologies. "A headache—nothing serious—her deepest regrets," and the rest of it. And what manner of woman was *she*, Tairlaine wondered? A second wife, Sir George had told him; not the mother of these two children. Much younger than her husband, and quite attractive. But he had not much time to speculate before dinner, because Lord Rayle had come bustling in, let out a crow of pleasure, and button-holed him. Since Lord Rayle was firmly under the impression that Tairlaine had called somebody named Salton (whom Tairlaine had never heard of) a damned fool, he had taken a great fancy to him. He had made the American promise not to investigate the armour hall at all until after dinner, when he himself should explain all the fine points. . . .

And now the neighing laugh over the table where the fields of candles waved. Rayle's skinny fist hit it a blow which made the silver tingle.

"A baby," he repeated, with relish. "Ha. Ha, ha, ha."

"Don't talk like that, Father, please!" said Patricia.

"Is it—I mean, are they sure?"

"Be quiet, child," said Francis in a vacant voice.

The goat-beard waggled. "Dr. Manning says so. Ha—Manning's an old fool," Lord Rayle observed, brooding darkly as another thought struck him, "an old fool, and he can't play chess, and he *will* have it that the Roman short-sword was a superior weapon to the English longbow. . . . Pah!" His voice rose shrilly. "A bloody old fool, that's what he is——"

"Father, please!"

"——but any bloody old fool of a doctor ought to know when one of them's going to have a pup. I'll get him to tell you. He's up with your mother now, the old skirt-chaser. . . ."

"Come off it, Henry," Sir George said sharply. He pushed away his plate, and tried heavy sarcasm: "Since you've announced that, I suppose you know who's responsible for Doris? The man, I mean?"

"Eh?" demanded Lord Rayle, blinking. "Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. One of the footmen, I'll be bound. Yes, by George!—Lee or Saunders or somebody. . . . I won't

have such goin's-on in my house ! " he squawked suddenly. " I'll sack the whole lot of them, that's what I'll do, by George. . . . Er . . . what was I saying ? "

" Doris, you know," Francis suggested, rolling a breadcrumb.

" Oh, ah, Yes. Yes, of course. Do you know what it is ? It's a warning ! " He exploded into a neigh of laughter. Then he shot out a thin finger, cunningly leering, but it swerved, and did not point to anybody in particular. " I'm glad I made my rabbit-hutch. Devil take my body, it was an inspiration. Have some cheese," he added abruptly to Tairlaine. " Stilton. I like Stilton."

Tairlaine thought: Is he always like this ? And he glanced tentatively at Sir George, who was unconcernedly breaking a biscuit. At any uncomfortable moment, people will seize on the most unimportant noise and gravely listen. A grandfather clock stirred and rustled at the rear of the big dining-hall, almost invisible in shadows, and a wigged cavalier contemplated it from the frame of his portrait. The clock boomed, and went on leisurely beating out the hour of nine. They all listened to the strokes—having the dim idea, as people will, that it may hit more than the indicated number. There was only the noise of Lord Rayle crunching biscuit and wolfing cheese.

Patricia pushed back her chair.

" Eh ? " said Lord Rayle. " Coffee, girl. Coffee in the drawing-room."

She was very nervous, but her colour was heightened. The wide blue eyes were full of such obvious deceit that Tairlaine almost smiled. " Please, Father—if you don't mind . . . all the things that have happened ; I don't feel well. Please excuse me. I want to go to my room. I——"

" By all means ! " squeaked Lord Rayle, with sudden affability. " By all means, my dear. Run along. Ha, ha. Take care of yourself, that's a good girl."

He was neighing again as she left. Her departure seemed more or less to break up the suavity of the dinner. Everybody seemed gloomy except Lord Rayle, who tossed up his cheese-knife and caught it with a crow of pleasure. When they broke up a few minutes later, to go to the drawing-room for coffee, Bruce Massey excused himself. He took Lord

Rayle aside, and at least one person there heard what he said:

"Now, listen, sir. I wouldn't keep bothering you, but you've told me, and told me, and I shall be blamed for a month if I don't see to it. It's about those letters. There's at least one you've got to look over and sign immediately. I'll have it ready shortly, if you'll come with me. . . ."

"Letters?" repeated his lordship, sticking his head out. "Oh, ah. Yes. Quite. To be sure. You run along. I'll be there. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes—I want my coffee—for God's sake stop annoying me!" he broke off in exasperation. "Tch-tch-tch: shoo! I'll be there. In the office. No, the den. No, better make it the office. Eh?"

"I shall be in both places," Massey said grimly. He thrust his inevitable brief-case under his arm and went stolidly down the Great Hall as the rest of them entered the drawing-room.

Despite his usual garrulity, Lord Rayle was silent when they sat down to take their coffee. He sat gnomelike by the fireplace in a brown room of chairs in stamped Spanish leather, and brazen lamps shaded in red: an attempt at modernisation which failed heroically under the weight and bleakness of Bowstring. Wood brought a tray of cups, and Lord Rayle insisted on helping himself to sugar. He put in five lumps, almost filling the *demi-tasse*. The red firelight was on his screwed-up face as he hacked greedily at the mess with a spoon, like a man with a mortar and pestle.

"The old days are gone," observed Sir George, looking with contempt at the cup, which he balanced in the palm of his big hand. "Then we should have sat round the table and let the ladies worry in here. H'mf. Blooming shame. Lots of cigars, and sound port—hah! . . . You're a stickler for the old days, Henry. Why this modern nonsense?"

Goat-face peered up sadly.

"My liver," he explained piteously. "Used to do it. I always got drunk, and fell on the floor, and got rheumatism. This is Irene's idea—Lady Rayle; you a'n't met her, have you, Dr. Tairlaine? Ha. I even tried havin' beef and ale on the sideboard for breakfast, good English custom; got indigestion." He brightened after a cross-eyed, sad examination of the floor, and hammered into his cup. "But

there's sugar ! " he explained eagerly. " Lots of sugar, if you want it, and who don't ? "

Francis Steyne was sitting back in the shadow on one side of the big fireplace, his cup untouched on the floor. He was looking very solemn, and his fair moustache drooped. From his hip-pocket, surreptitiously, he took a large silver flask and drank with relish. A sleepy expression of warmth came into his face as he replaced the flask.

" I say, Kestevan," he began with interest, leaning forward, his chin pillowed in his palm ; " you intrigue me, the way you sit there. What do you think about, all the time ? "

Lawrence Kestevan was, obviously, as near surprise as his impassivity would permit. He was balanced on his chair like a carefully-tied Christmas package, chin slightly up, and he had a ghastly habit of extending his little finger when he raised his cup. The neck turned on a pivot.

" Why," said Kestevan, " why—I don't know."

He appeared nonplussed. The imitation American accent whistled through his nose.

" Well," argued Francis, taking another drink, " the thought-processes. I mean to say, you don't say much ; they must be very deep, and all that ? "

" Generally," Kestevan replied seriously, " I try to work out new dance-steps."

" Isn't that rather fatiguing ? " inquired Sir George.

Kestevan found a crease out of line in his trousers. That deadly, blank, inward expression in his sloe-eyes (which had figured so many times in the motion pictures when he was about to place somebody On the Spot) indicated that he was thinking. He adjusted the crease.

" I don't know what you're talking about," he said simply. He became decisive. " Excuse me, won't you ? I got to go to my room and write some letters."

Rising, he walked with his unhurried, self-assured, almost swaggering gait out of the drawing-room.

Francis took another drink.

" That reminds me ! " Lord Rayle squeaked suddenly. He tilted the cup over the nose of his back-thrown head to get the last of the sugar. Tairlaine saw the Adam's apple bobbing in his turkey-like throat. " Ha. Letters. Sign a

letter. I never can find that damned secretary of mine. He's never where I tell him to be. I must go myself. . . ."

"The armour——" Tairlaine suggested.

"Eh?" Lord Rayle stared at him. "Oh, yes, of course. You! You're the young man who called Salton a bloody, dithering, blundering ass, aren't you? Delighted, delighted. Tell you what. You go into the library and wait for me. Don't stir, now!" he warned shrilly, raising an admonishing finger. "Don't you dare go near that armour hall until I get there, you hear. . . . I've got to find my secretary and tell him what's what. Come to think of it, the young thief pinched my gauntlets. . . . Oh, dash it, I've broken the cup. Never mind. It's better than having it stolen. Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye."

He hurried out into the Great Hall, poking his face over his shoulder and waving.

"Well——" muttered Sir George. "You might give me a nip out of that flask, young fellow. I've been watching you saturate yourself for a long time."

Francis said: "Pleasure. I told you it was a devil of a household, Dr. Tairlaine."

Sir George appeared embarrassed. His big body was pushed forward in the chair, shoulders hunched and eyes peering up in that characteristic way. The fingers of his hands were working slowly. -He wheezed.

"There's another thing, Frank. Your father's eccentricities won't explain it. What about this girl Doris?"

"Well, what about her?—Give me back that flask."

"How did she come to be—eh?"

Francis slid down until he was resting on his spine, eyes half shut.

"Oh, God, I didn't do it, if that's what you're hinting. . . . Not that I wouldn't have, if she'd given me half a chance," he added reflectively. "We shan't know much, if I'm any judge. I'm willing to wager she won't tell on the man.—Pretty little thing. Dashed pretty, I mean to say. Great favourite of Irene—my stepmother—you know. Don't get the wind up. They won't give her the sack; that is, not unless our good housekeeper (that's Mrs. Carter, you know)

raises too much of a row. Trouble with widow ladies is, they need to know the Facts of Life. Ah, well. . . . What about a game of billiards?"

Sir George said: "You know damned well there's something funny going on here."

Francis rose languidly. His fair-coloured face was rather flushed; he should not, Tairlaine decided, have taken that last drink.

He said: "Is there? Billiards. Dr. Tairlaine, you'll want to wait in the library for the old man. Don't be surprised if he's long in turning up. He'll probably go and sit in the Trophy Room, and swear he told Bruce to meet him there, and raise the devil about it. . . . Come along, Sir George. I'll spot you ten."

So here he was, Tairlaine reflected, sitting before the fire in the library and waiting for the master of Bowstring. Later he was to realise he was so sunk in reverie that a dozen people could have passed him in the big room without attracting his attention; anybody, that is, besides Lord Rayle himself. He was listening for the hurrying, heel-and-toe slap of the little peer's walk, and listening, meantime, to the ceaseless voice of the waterfall beyond the library windows.

Lighting another cigar, he took the poker and stirred up the fire. A log rolled and bumped, gushing flame and scattering sparks; its underside glowed with a map-veined, fierce red. Mist had begun to drift through the open window, but he hesitated to get up and close it. A still, cool night, with hardly a swish in the trees outside.

Remarkably still in the house, too, unless the waterfall were responsible for drowning out other noises. He had itched to have at least one glance inside the armour hall before Lord Rayle arrived. There was its gigantic pointed doorway, the door slightly ajar, down at the end of the room, at right angles to the wall of the fireplace before which he sat; and there, near the door, was the corridor running out between the music-room and drawing-room to the Great Hall. Tairlaine hitched his chair round so that he could look. . . .

Lord Rayle was coming now. The hurrying, quick creak and slap of his shoes drifted to him from the corridor. Up

out of it popped the white-robed figure, muttering to itself. Tairlaine sat up.

"Ah," he called. "You're here at la——"

He might have expected it. Goat-face growled something into his neck and pounced at the door of the armour hall.

Tairlaine called fatuously: "I'm right here, sir. I——"

Another voice spoke as the hurrying figure hopped across the threshold of the armour hall. Somebody in the armour hall, Tairlaine observed, accosting him. . . .

"I've been trying to find you," it urged; "these letters, sir——!"

A querulous exchange of words, indistinguishable. Bruce Massey was brushed out into the library, almost carried on the wind of Lord Rayle's passing. The tall door boomed shut.

For a moment Tairlaine saw Massey staring at the armour-room door, his back to the library. Then the secretary turned about. He walked slowly across towards Tairlaine, the brief-case under his arm; and as he approached out of the shadows Tairlaine was startled by the expression on his face.

It would take much, he knew, to surprise this young Massey, accustomed as he was to the nerve-twisting vagaries of Lord Rayle. But it was worse than this. In every step of his stocky body there was the stolidity of the unmoved, efficient moon-face; but Tairlaine could have sworn that the man was frightened.

He drew out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead as he approached the fireplace. "Doctor," he said, in a curious voice, "have you been talking to *him*? Has he been in here with you all the time? . . . No. No," Massey amended, moving his head thoughtfully, "he couldn't have been. He wasn't here when I came through the corridor to look for him. You seemed to be asleep in the chair. I wonder . . ."

His round eyes were circling the apartment. Tairlaine said:

"Good God, what's the matter?"

"You don't suppose," the secretary muttered in an absent

voice, "his brain's gone at last, do you? I mean—well, the fact is, Doctor, I tell you quite calmly and coolly that I never saw such a horrible expression on a human face before. And that's a fact. Let me sit down."

He drew up a chair at the fire, produced some cigarettes, and as he struck a match he examined his hand to see whether it might be trembling.

"My God," he said.

Smoke billowed in little jerks from his mouth. He tried blowing rings, and failed. "Straight past me, like a wind. Struck my arm away, and said something about 'Pearls'—that's all I could catch. Then he slammed the door on me. Listen: how long have you been sitting here?"

"Oh, ten or fifteen minutes. Ever since we all left the drawing-room. Why?"

"Before he got here, did you see anybody go into the armour hall except me? Earlier?"

"No. But then I mightn't have, you know," Tairlaine said. He was becoming more and more uneasy; the New England blood tingled a little, and he felt somehow guilty. "I was—well, thinking. Why?"

Literally for minutes Massey did not speak. Tairlaine waited. Then:

"I went in there looking for him. When I got to the middle of the hall I was sure I heard somebody moving about there: a sort of rustling, if you understand what I mean. I spoke aloud, but when you get past the middle of the hall the waterfall makes such an infernal racket that it's difficult to hear. Anyway, the noise stopped. I poked about, but there didn't seem to be anything. There was only one light on, a very dim one, so that you could see almost nothing; but that fact mightn't necessarily have meant he wasn't there. He's quite apt to prowl about in the dark. I got disgusted. I know one should keep one's temper, and all that, but hang it——!" Massey shifted uncomfortably: the fire drew and he rapidly smoked his cigarette, and his fleshy face looked tired. "So I came out. Just as I came out . . . you saw it. Good God, I don't know what to think now!"

During this recital, Tairlaine had been staring with a sort of fascination at the closed door of the armour hall. It was

erie with the glamour of almost terrifying fancies. He did not take his eyes from the door.

" ' Pearls ' ? " he repeated. " Do you have any idea what he meant when he said that ? "

Massey hesitated. " I think I have. I—anyway, it's no secret. But I don't see how it applies." He tapped the brief-case nervously. " Lady Rayle has several valuable strings of pearls, of course, but he is going to give her a new one for her birthday: that's a week from to-day. He brought a jeweller up from London last week with some samples, and they all selected one. So——"

Still with his eyes on the door, Tairlaine saw Francis Steyne's long figure amble round the turn of the corridor, holding tray and decanter. And Tairlaine thought: " Doesn't anybody ever come into the library by way of the drawing-room ? Do they *all* use that corridor ? "

" Hallo, you chaps ! " Francis called. " Would you like a drink ? "

" Yes," Massey said decidedly.

" I was trimming the Bart at billiards," explained the other, juggling his tray high like a waiter, " and we felt the need of spirituous refreshment. I couldn't rouse Wood—God knows where he is—so I got the ingredients myself. I'm hospitable, I am. Have a spot."

From the rear of the house, somebody screamed.

It was muffled, but so shrill that it pierced like a needle under your tooth. Tairlaine winced. The high-held tray slid so dangerously that Massey had to make a clumsy catch of the decanter as it fell. Then they waited; and Massey stood absurdly with the whisky-decanter shaking in his hands, and Francis turned a white face with slow stupidity in the direction of the armour-hall door.

It seemed to be minutes before they could hear, above the waterfall-noise, the click of running heels. Tairlaine ran forward, half-way up the library, and his eyes noted with a horrible fascination how the handle of the armoury door was wiggling back and forth as somebody tried fumblingly to open it. The mist from the open window forced a choked cough from his throat. But he could not go on. He realised then that he was considerably past forty. . . .

Then Francis was past him, and Francis caught Patricia

Steyne as she stumbled out of the door. She sagged over his shoulder. Handing her to Massey, who held the limp form and looked at her face, Francis pushed the heavy door farther open.

He disappeared into the dimness, and presently he came out. Francis seemed to be staggering, but that was only because his knees shook. He put his back against the wall to brace himself, and regarded them dully.

"I'm glad we've still got Dr. Manning here," he said, almost with eagerness. "The old man's dead."

Then he began swabbing and swabbing aimlessly at his eyes with the back of his hand, to blot away sweat, or a certain sight.

CHAPTER IV

THE NAILED DOOR

HENRY STEYNE, LORD RAYLE, needed the sonorousness of his title now. He lay on his face beneath a pedestal-base above which reared a gigantic armoured dummy on an armoured wooden horse. It was almost exactly in the centre of a ninety-foot hall full of dim glimmering shapes and withered war-flags. The dulled gilt-powdered armour of the figure, *ventail* closed, loomed alive in this gloom; the war-horse, trailing rich caparisons, reared and pawed above Henry Steyne with a lifted foreleg. Henry Steyne was as dead as the dummy.

When they stood over him, they saw that he needed small examination. The blue folds of his neck had closed over a cord imbedded there. This bowstring was tightly knotted, and its loose ends hung down on either side of his neck. The grey-white, ruffled hair almost covered it. They did not like to look at his face, so they did not turn him over. Still he wore his grimy white robe, though the cowl appeared to be torn; his arms were beneath him, backs of the hands squashed up against his breast, and his head hunched between his shoulders. The legs were widespread, but doubled at the knees, and the toes turned under, almost

as though he had fallen while trying to do one of those squatting-rising exercises in calisthenics.

All this they saw because Massey kept striking match after match, and cursing when each burnt down against his fingers. Lord Rayle, never large, was inconceivably tiny in death; he was just a dummy strangled in a hall of dummies.

Tairlaine, standing above him, felt the slow empty pounding of his heart. But he marvelled that he did not feel more shaken or moved in the presence of death. He felt guilty because his connoisseur's eye had been at work ever since they walked into this hall. And he kept staring round now as he listened to Massey's low monotonous cursing. Only one low yellow light burned, over near the door; dark shapes became monsters.

Astonished at the steadiness of his voice, Tairlaine asked: "Are there any more lights?"

Massey's round face looked grotesque in the gleam of the match. It seemed absurdly as though he were hunting for a collar button.

"Er——?" he said. "More—oh! Yes. Over near the door; central lights. But none of us are ever allowed to turn them on. We just don't think of doing it. He . . . I forgot," said Massey. The match went out. "I forgot. Yes. Get some light, for God's sake!"

Still the sense of unreality, as though the thing had not happened. Tairlaine put his hand on the younger man's shoulder. He asked:

"Were you fond of him?"

A pause. "No," Massey said slowly, "no, I don't think I was. I don't think anybody was. But there was something—you get accustomed to taking care of people like him, as though they were children." Another pause. Massey added in a queer voice: "You know, I expect I'll be the only one who's sorry he's gone."

Tairlaine's steps echoed hollowly as he went down to find the light-switch. The floor was made of immense squares of dull red tile, with white mortar running between. It was very cold; freezing cold, and damp. The waterfall was directly outside the outer wall of this room, and its hollow *whoom* sometimes shook tinglings from the ghostly glass

cases. Tairlaine pressed his hands together; they were a little clammy, and his heart continued to bump, but that was all.

He found the main light-switch near the door. And, as he switched it on with a resultant very faint click, he found himself wondering. Some recollection knocked at the back of his brain, as insistent as a woodpecker. As the light-switch clicked, he stood and stared blankly, trying to remember. . . .

A click. At some time during the last twenty minutes, surely—while he had been staring at this closed door from his seat by the library fire, he thought—he had heard from the direction of the armour hall a sort of blurry metallic *click*. When had it occurred? There was no reason for dwelling on the point, or teasing his brain with it. His memory might be full of tricks. Had it come from the light-switch? That was fantastic, despite the whispering-gallery of the library, which seemed to carry sharply the smallest noise. Besides, the door had been closed. . . .

Gritting his teeth, he turned back to the cold armour hall.

Concealed bulbs in the roof lighted it with cold radiance. This room, it was obvious, was designed never to be seen by the light of day. On the left-hand side there were no windows. The tumult of the waterfall was so loud that Tairlaine suspected this wall had been hollowed out to a breadth of less than two feet, in order to afford greater space for Lord Rayle's collection. Lefèvre tapestries of the middle-seventeenth century, from the ateliers founded by Henry IV, were hung along this wall; and in the intervals were the weapon-groups, lustrous with deadly polish. Covering almost the entire rear wall was a colossal tapestry representing the sack of Jerusalem by Titus and Vespasian. Before it stood a tall and circular medieval stove, of blue and white tiles in the Teutonic manner, which was flanked by glass cases of racks containing swords—broadsword, claymore, basket-hilt, estoo, schiavona, and cup-hilted rapier, up to the light gilt-and-ivory court-swords of a more polite day.

Tairlaine's eyes roved. That right-hand wall, now. . . .

The armour hall ran up two storeys, as the Great Hall did. Midway up along the right-hand wall there was a fretted balcony with a low railing, running the length of that side. A small, circular iron staircase led up to it. In the wall

overlooking the balcony, higher up, there were four slender windows glittering with a mosaic of many-coloured glass. Tairlaine thought: "Spurious," and damned himself for taking such pains. They must be dummy windows, put there merely for show, because the house itself was built up behind them.

But these were secondary to the other exhibits—or the One Exhibit, not yet ticketed. In high glass cases along all the walls stood the complete suits of armour; the Norman chain-mail and the Gothic plate, the tilting-heaume and the morion, all as though poised and tensely sinister under the dried colours of the war-banners hanging at intervals from the roof. Tairlaine glanced at the empty case whose velvet base bore the impress of a gauntlet, and then across at the case of crossbows wherein a cord was missing from one bow. . . .

Stark in the centre, that immense gold-dusted figure on horseback reared up almost with motion; it seemed to tower up even higher above Lord Rayle. Tairlaine saw his own breath steaming in the big cold hall. And then, startingly, he heard his own voice booming down it.

"He was murdered," said Tairlaine.

Massey, who had been still staring down at the body, looked up vaguely.

"I—I suppose he was," he assented, and Tairlaine saw that he was shaking. "But I wish the doctor would get here. I'm cold. I need a drink."

"Do you think," the other said, "do you think the murderer wore gauntlets when he strangled him?"

"Good God, what put an idea like that into your head?" Massey demanded. His lethargy partly lifted. He glanced at Tairlaine, and then down at the body. "You mean . . . I see! I see now. The gauntlets that were stolen. Oh, look here——!" he urged, in distressed tones. Finding nothing to protest about, he went on: "But there's one thing. I can't accustom myself to this as being murder, but, if it is—what about Pat? She must have seen the murder."

"And the murderer."

"And the murderer," Massey agreed in a low voice. He nodded. "But what do you think she was doing? I

give you my word she hasn't been in here with this collection since I've known her. She says it's 'hateful.' "

He paused as Francis came into the hall. With him was a big, smooth-shaven, affable man with gold eyeglasses and an air like a parson; he carried a black bag, and walked with that peculiar air of always treading slightly sideways, which physicians get from following people through narrow hallways.

"Over there, Doctor," said Francis, and Francis seemed very tired.

"Tch! Tch! Bad. Very bad," said the doctor. His manner was carefully professional, but they all knew he had been given a bad shock. As he bent over the body, Tairlaine saw that his hands were trembling. "Just a moment, please. If you will just step to one side, Mr. Massey——? Thank you. Now."

Francis suddenly put his hands over his eyes.

Tairlaine said in a low voice: "Steady, boy," and gripped the young man's shoulder. He waited a moment, while Francis slowly removed his hands from a drawn and sagging face; then he asked:

"Your sister?"

"She'll be all right. It was shock. She's lying down in the drawing-room. Go out and sit with her, will you, Bruce?—and for God's sake don't alarm the household yet. I don't think anybody else heard that yell. If you get a chance, ask Sir George Anstruther to come in here."

Massey moved uncertainly towards the door. He kept glancing over his shoulder, and he almost ran into a glass case. Francis said: "It—you know, it doesn't seem right, somehow, but I've got to smoke," and he hastily lighted a cigarette. Presently he went on, after a few uncertain starts:

"That business: bowstring, wasn't it? Eh?"

"Looks like it."

"Somebody—somebody *killed* him, you know. Didn't they?"

"Keep your voice down, now. Yes, it seems so."

Francis muttered in a puzzled voice, through puffs of smoke: "That just doesn't seem possible. Mur—I don't know; I don't like to say it. Look here, sir, you were sitting out there in the library, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Could you see the door?"

"As a matter of fact," Tairlaine answered slowly, "I didn't take my eyes away from it for an instant after the time your father came in here—which was only a little over five minutes before you came in yourself."

Francis regarded him stupidly. As comprehension took the film off his eyes, he tried to take the cigarette out of his mouth; but his lips were so dry that it stuck. He tugged it loose viciously.

"But then—somebody did this, you know. He must have come out, or he must be hiding here. My God, do you think . . ."

Tairlaine said vigorously: "This much I'll swear. Nobody has left by that door except your sister. I not only watched it before, but I've watched it every second since. *Nobody has left by that door at any time.*"

And, as later events proved, Tairlaine spoke the absolute truth. For the moment, he could see only bewilderment in Francis's eyes. The young man stared at him for a moment; then he went to the door, locked it on the inside, and pocketed the key.

"We can see about that," he said. "What's the word, Doctor?"

Manning straightened up, dusting the knees of his trousers. His resemblance to a large and well-fed clergyman was heightened by the gold chain of his eyeglasses running to his ear. And he seemed a trifle more concerned than the death of a mere acquaintance would warrant.

"Dead, of course," he said in a low voice. "You didn't need a doctor to tell you that. He has been dead only a few minutes, strangled with that cord. He was a frail man. It didn't take much time for him to die; two minutes or so, perhaps." He hesitated. "I am the county coroner, you know, Francis. I shall have to—take steps. It's deuced awkward, of course, but . . ."

"Murder," said Francis, in a matter-of-fact voice, and squinted over his cigarette.

"Undoubtedly."

A hesitation. "I say, Doctor, excuse me, but . . . I'm no hand at words. I should just botch it. And you have

the manner. I wonder if you'd mind. Lady Rayle has to know, sooner or later, and if *you* did it——?"

"At once," the doctor replied gravely. "Incidentally, I shall have to inform the police."

As he let the doctor out, Francis stood at the door staring almost fiercely into the library. Momentarily his slouch and his chirping air had disappeared. He turned to Tairlaine.

"Excuse my frankness, sir, and I hope you won't take offence at what I say. You look like a kindly old duck, and I'm jolly certain you're honest. I don't know whether you're intelligent or not, but I know you're honest. I can depend on you, and I think I can depend on Sir George." He frowned. "Sorry. There's another I need now. I mean to say . . ."

Tairlaine found his neckband growing hot and prickly with annoyance. He was not old, and as for intelligence—why, *damn* the young puppy! He was about to speak when Francis put his head out the door and called softly, "Saunders!"

A footman, flat-faced, burly, and grotesque in his costume, poked through a cautious countenance.

The odd look on Tairlaine's face betrayed his thoughts to Francis, who remarked brusquely: "I'm thirty-five, sir. Saunders, help us search this place. Don't leave an inch uncovered. There may be somebody hiding. Understand?"

"Bad, sir, that there," said the footman, jerking his head towards the body and speaking in a hoarse whisky voice. He looked doubtful. "Would your man be 'iding in one of them suits of armour, sir?"

"Impossible. That's film stuff. But *look*. Look there anyway. Hop to it." He turned to Tairlaine, almost in desperation. "There's got to be somebody hiding. If you say nobody came out of that door . . . there's no other entrance. There's no way to get in or out at all! Not a rat-hole. You're sure nobody could have slipped past you at any time?"

"Positive. But what about the balcony?—those windows? The . . . the murderer might have left that way."

"They open into bedrooms. Or, rather, they don't open

at all. They're fitted tightly, with heavy locks on the inside, and always locked; anyway, I doubt if you could push one open by main force. But we'll try."

Together they mounted the circular iron stair, Francis going ahead with his fierce and shambling stride. He paused at the top, and made room for Tairlaine to squeeze in beside him.

"Nobody came up *here*," he said grimly. "Look."

The balcony was about four feet wide, of polished oak, and with a broad balustrade some three feet high. From end to end it was covered with a smooth, thick layer of dust, as was also the top of the balustrade. Francis drew a line in the dust with the toe of his shoe. It was the only mark there.

Tairlaine's eyes strayed to the windows. They were about fifteen feet apart, glittering in their blue and gold and red mosaic, and rising to a peak some distance up.

Francis said: "We'll try everything. Help me. . . . Let's see. I know they open like a door, with hinges on the inside, but do they open inward or outward? Inward, of course! Here, we'll try 'em all. I know they're locked on the inside, but try it."

Together they seized the frame and pushed with their combined strengths. The window did not budge. Moving softly to the next one, they tried it with the same result. None of the four windows responded, though they exerted considerable force.

Tairlaine found his breath coming short. He wiped his hands on a handkerchief.

He said: "Dust and windows. Well, I'll take another oath. Nobody left this room by a window, either."

They stared at each other. Then Tairlaine's eyes moved down into the hall below. He could see the big, absurd figure of Saunders snooping with methodical slowness. His livery made a splash of almost effeminate colour against the sombre and terrible steel. Leaning his hands on the dust of the balustrade, Tairlaine contemplated a pavilion of hanging banners—a rampant Viennese lion, dim brown on faded yellow; a powdering of gold fleur-de-lys on the Sun King's battle-flag; the Spanish arms, faint red and yellow and black, torn by musket-balls—all the stiff ensigns embalmed

below him. The glass cases glimmered dully. He could see a part of the dead peer's blue and bloated face.

Saunders's slow footfalls echoed. . . .

He was through at last. He came to rest before the locked door again.

"There's nobody 'ere, sir," he called positively. "I'll kiss the Book on it. And there ain't nobody *been* 'ere, if you look at the dust."

Francis, his white shirt-front smeared with dust and his fair hair flopping down in his eyes, took out a handkerchief and quietly dusted himself. The elaborate disjointedness of his speech had returned.

"You know, sir, this is a hole. I mean to say, it's bad. No way in, no way out, nobody hiding. . . . You know what they'll say?"

"You mean——?"

"Pat. She was the only person here."

"But, my God, that's nonsense!"

"Right you are. But what of it?—you see?"

"Isn't there some way? Some hidden door, or a secret passage, or anything of that sort? It isn't conceivable that that girl——!"

Francis's long face brightened. He lifted an eyebrow. "Excuse me, sir. You've been going to the cinema, too. Like Saunders there. Sorry, but there isn't. No ghosts. No priest's hole, no . . . Oh, Lord!"

He stopped short, his eyes opening wide, and snapped his fingers. Then he pushed past Tairlaine and darted down the gallery. The American felt a jab of pain in his side as he followed. Francis seemed to skid down the stairway; his footsteps clattered and echoed as he pelted for the tapestry at the back of the hall—the vast Flemish tapestry which occupied almost the entire wall.

"Here you are, Saunders," he snapped. "Grab this thing in the middle, and hold it up. Over your head; high as you can. Up she goes, now. . . .

"I'm a prize ass, Doctor. I could remember every nook and cranny of this place, but I almost forgot a thing as obvious as the front door itself."

"Sir——" began the footman, turning a dusty face, "sir——"

"Be quiet, Saunders, and raise that tapestry. This hall is built directly against the old donjon-keep of the castle. The donjon-keep is closed up, of course, like all the other towers. But there's a door here leading into it. A big door. . . . I say, this is splendid! This is the way the murderer left, of course. Lift, Saunders, *lift*——!"

Saunders's long arms made an enormous tent of the tapestry. As the light fell inside, Francis leaned forward, and then paused suddenly. Tairlaine heard a smothered sound. Taking hold of a big knob, Francis wrenched frantically. As Tairlaine peered under the tapestry, he saw the light shining on lines of little bright circles up and down the sides of the door.

"I was trying to tell you, sir," Saunders said patiently. "You can't open that there door; on me oath, you can't. It was the master, sir; 'is lordship. 'E come in 'ere this afternoon and nailed it up, sir, tight as a drum, wiv tenpenny nails. . . And then round 'e goes, sir, and nails it up on the other side."

CHAPTER V

A STRING OF PEARLS

THEY walked slowly back along the armour hall, after futile soundings and wrenchings at the nailed door.

Francis muttered meditatively: "So that was the reason for the hammer and the tenpenny nails. And if he broke inside that donjon to secure it on the other side, it's no wonder he got so dirty. . . . But *why*? Why nail up that door?"

He nibbled at his finger-nails.

"I say, it's dashed odd how one's mind keeps running on the stories. I mean to say—fiction. Thinking about people hidden in suits of armour, and all that. There never was a suit of armour in the films which didn't up and hit somebody with a broadsword; it's quite a tradition. Even Saunders suspected it, first off. Damn." He scowled and shuffled his shoes on the tile. "Now I keep thinking about the rue

Morgue. I mean to say: dummy nails. Ones that don't run clear through the frame, you know."

"Not in that there door," Saunders declared with hoarse positiveness, over his shoulder. "Solid as a wall, that 'ere door is. Saw 'im do it meself. Yus. And after 'e'd gone into the donjohn . . . funny," Saunders broke off, licking his lips reflectively, "funny 'ow that there word sounds like demi-john . . . after that, I says, 'e nails up t'other side, and then 'e nails up the outer door to the donjohn itself—hout in the courtyard back of 'ere, d'ye see, sir? That's flat."

"Spy," said Francis unemotionally. "Go and get yourself a drink, if you must have it. And stop hinting. Well."

He paused by his father's body, examining it now with a calm eye. "I say, we shall want a magnifying glass, you know. There's one in the den. You see, I feel almost certain the chap who did this wore gauntlets. They've sharp edges; they'd probably mark that leather cord . . . Hallo."

He bent over.

"Here's the dad's wallet," he added, pointing. It was a leather one, lying open beside the body, and thrown into shadow. There were a few soiled papers protruding from it, and it was stamped with the initials H. S. "We needn't touch it. They always raise the devil if you go mucking about."

His voice echoed with desperate jocularly under the pale-lit roof. Tairlaine suggested:

"Hadn't we better——?"

"Yes, of course. Interview Pat. I say, this is rather awful. I think it's a good thing I play golf."

"Golf?"

Francis swabbed all around his face, and under his neck-band, with a large handkerchief; as though he were wiping himself with a towel. His eyes had taken on a glaze. "You meet interesting people on golf courses," he explained. "Interesting people down at that hotel—you know?—the one we passed coming up here. Did you ever hear of John Gaunt?"

"No."

"I rather think we shall all hear of him," Francis asserted, frowning. "Come along, sir."

When they went out of the armour hall, he again locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then they crossed the library into the drawing-room, Saunders padding behind like a tame tiger. On the corner of a leather lounge, her eyes turned up blindly to the glow of a brazen lamp, Patricia lay curled up. A small child; a pale, full-faced child in a dinner-dress whose lace fluffs at the breast were crumpled up and begrimed, and the breast itself heaved with jerky breathing. On the edge of the lounge beside her, Massey sat aimlessly chafing one of her wrists. Sir George Anstruther, his face full of sudden wrinkles, was holding a billiard-cue and staring at her.

Sir George said: "Good God, are you all mad, or is this true?"

"Go and look for yourself," Francis answered. He lifted his shoulders wearily. "Gad, I'm sorry, Pat. It must have given you a turn. But what happened?"

"I'm all right, really," she told him in a thin, struggling voice. Then she began to cry.

Massey patiently took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped her eyes. Disengaging an empty glass from her hand, he sat and waited.

"I'm—*all right*!" she repeated fiercely. "I won't be a b—baby; I—I mean, is he really . . . ?"

"Yes, old girl," said Francis. "He's gone. You can't help it. But tell us about it."

She struggled up on thin arms and stared back with wide, wet, horrified eyes. She said: "I found him. I tripped over him, almost. It was ghastly. And there was only one little light, and I could see his shoe turned sideways."

"But what were you *doing* there, dear?"

"Why, I was coming out," she said in a sort of blank surprise, as though that explained everything.

Francis was patient. "Yes, of course, and it's a jolly shame, Pat. But I mean, what were you doing there in the first place? In the armour hall?"

She hesitated, baffled, uncertain, and obviously trying to find a lie. She seemed to meditate whether it would help if she wept again. "I was just *there*, Frank.—I have a perfect

right to go in there if I like, haven't I?" she demanded, with mounting hysteria.

"Of course. Where were you: just walking about?"

"Yes! That's it. Just walking about. *You* know."

Francis clucked his tongue. "Oh, come now, Pat. In the dark—or almost in the dark? Come now, dear. You know you're afraid of ghosts. We're all your friends. Tell us."

"I was so mean to him!" she burst out, her eyes filming over. "So hateful. I talked back to him. . . . I'll tell! I'll tell! I was behind the stove."

A wrinkle crossed Francis's forehead. He glanced at Sir George, who was twirling the cue round in his fingers. Drawing out a chair, Francis sat down beside her and took her hands.

"You mean the big porcelain one, at the back of the hall?"

"I shan't tell you!"

"But you said——"

"Shan't! Shan't! Shan't!" she cried, shaking her head like a pettish child. "Anyway, it's none of your business. I got my hands dirty, too," she added irrelevantly.

Sir George touched Francis's shoulder. "She's had a bad nervous shock, Frank. Better let her alone for a bit."

"You're a dear!" said Patricia, and began to weep afresh.

"But it doesn't make any difference, dear," Francis told her soothingly. "Anyway, you hadn't been there very long, had you?"

"No. Not very. I'd had to change my frock first, you see. Then, when I went through the library, that nice old man was sitting in front of the fire with his eyes shut, and I tiptoed because I thought he was asleep . . . that's the reason I tiptoed. Then I went into the hall, and I was at the back part of it . . ."

"Did you turn on the big lights?"

"Oh, *no*! Somebody might have—oh, please stop bullying me! Please!"

"You're doing fine, Pat," Francis informed her, patting her hands. "Here, blow your nose. That's fine. I say, you're a little *naïf*. What happened then?"

"Well, you see," she rambled on eagerly, "I just waited—you know? Then I thought I heard a noise, like a movement or something, or somebody walking, but I couldn't be sure because of the noise of the water. Anyway, I squeezed in behind the stove."

"That would be me," said Massey stolidly. "And then what, Miss Steyne?"

"Then there was a long wait, and I heard some people talking—they must have been talking loudly, because generally you can't hear at all—and directly I heard the door slam."

"That was Father coming in," Francis said in a low voice. "Steady, now, Pat! Did you look out from behind the stove?"

"No. Oh, God, *no*! I didn't want them to find . . . I don't know what I'm saying, and anyway just then I was behind the tapestry. I held it out with my hands, so it wouldn't touch my face; it was all horrible and dirty, and I thought it had bugs, and . . ."

Studying the girl's wide-open eyes, studying her frail blue-veined hands which were clenched on the leg of Francis's trousers, Tairlaine conjured up the scene. The immense darkened hall, lit by a lonely yellow pin-point, full of sinister steel gleams. The old man hobbling down after the hollow slam of the door, his footsteps inaudible once he had passed the half of the room where the waterfall roared most loudly. And then, while his daughter stood behind that great tapestry, the bowstring—

Had he cried out, she would not have heard it. But the cord jerked tight from behind, in gauntleted hands; it would have taken little more than a minute, two at the most, to quench the breath in those thin lungs.

Sharp in Tairlaine's brain were the fingers of these steel gauntlets. But *how*? How? The murderer did not leave by the door, he did not leave by the windows, he did not get through that nailed door, or any secret entrance, but he was not hiding in the room at any time.* As the puzzle grew cool, it became more fantastic and more maddening.

"You didn't hear anything, or see anything, then?" Francis was asking.

* Let it be noted that these statements are true in every particular.

"I heard rats," she said. "That was why I had to go. I came out, and that was when I saw him."

Francis nursed his chin.

"You had better go upstairs, dear, and lie down," he said. "Bruce will take you up. Oh, and you might send up Mrs. Carter to sit with her, Bruce. Please go, Pat."

Evidently she had not anticipated so quick an end to the inquisition. She regarded him in a frightened, puzzled way, seeking a trap; but her unsubtle mind decided that there was none, and a sort of pathetic brightness came into her eyes. She apologised for her red nose; a faint, thankful smile moved round the full lips, and she leaned gratefully on Massey's arm as she went out.

Staring after her, Francis nodded.

"She's been experimenting with make-up, too," he remarked absently. "Yes, and perfume. Looks like a wax doll with the colours run." He turned almost fiercely to Tairlaine and Sir George, the latter of whom was scratching his ear with the billiard cue.

"I say, you know, I'm no moralist," he continued, "but Pat's never been ten miles away from Aldbridge since she was born—except, I remember, when the old man took her to Paris once; and then he sat her on a chair in the Louvre all day for a week running, and threatened to shut her up in a dark closet if she moved. She's frightfully afraid of the dark. She wouldn't have gone into that hall at all without jolly good reason."

"Those nails in the door——" Tairlaine began.

Francis said: "I think we can understand why the old man nailed up that door, now. Quite. The donjon would make a good trysting-place; nobody ever goes there. And *he* could get through by the door in the back courtyard without exciting suspicion. Only—neither one of 'em could get into the donjon. The old man had nailed up both doors."

"*He?*" repeated Sir George.

Francis glanced round swiftly. Saunders, silent and gawky, stood by the door to the Great Hall.

"Saunders!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Ask Mr. Kestevan to step down here, will you? Hop to it."

When Saunders had gone, Francis explained the facts briefly to Sir George. The stout baronet had adjusted his bulk in a chair, and was whistling absently between his teeth.

"I was afraid of this," he remarked at length.

"You suspect anybody?" asked Tairlaine.

"I don't know," said Sir George slowly. "I don't know. . . . But you see what happened? The murderer didn't steal one of those original bowstrings, which might have broken when he wound it round his victim's throat. He stole a new one. A stout leather one, which wouldn't break." Reflectively, Sir George opened and closed his pudgy hands, staring at them. "I say, Frank, who knew it wasn't an old and rotten cord?"

"That's no lead. Everybody in the county, so far as I know," the other answered. "The old man never got tired raving about what I did when I wasn't more than fifteen or sixteen years old. I mean, when I broke his damned old string. He used to tell the story regularly at the dinner-table, and we had to listen. Damn it. But there's another thing . . ."

With a sort of inspiration, Francis seemed to remember the flask in his hip-pocket. He drew it out, handed it first to Tairlaine and then Sir George, and afterwards he sighed over a deep drink. Then he shook the flask sadly.

"Now, then. I don't know if you remember . . . when we were driving up here, I told you about Doris saying she saw one of the suits of armour standing in the middle of the big staircase?"

"That Doris side of things," Sir George muttered, "that Doris——"

"She wasn't dreaming," said Francis.

"For the love of God," snapped Sir George, "don't *you* go psychic on us."

"Well, I mean to say—there were marks on the stair-rail, you know. Five scratches. They looked like the points of gauntlet-fingers."

Sir George stared at him. Then Sir George took up his billiard-cue and sighted along it as though he were manœuvring for a shot. He took a long time, studying the invisible billiard balls, before he lifted his fish-glazed grey eyes again.

He said flatly: "It won't do, Frank. Tell me what you like about suits of armour walking about the house. But this other matter—no way in, no way out of the armour hall; look here, it won't wash. Somebody was mistaken or dreaming. Eh?"

His gaze wavered as they looked back at him steadily. Nobody spoke. They knew what was true. Incredulity, uneasiness, anger, tinged Sir George's face even more redly: he looked like a wrathful inn-sign. During a long silence the faint murmur of the waterfall sang with sardonic insistence. . . . Sir George slapped the butt of his cue against the floor.

"But I tell you, damn it, the thing's impossible!" he shouted.

"I shall have to get this flask filled," Francis observed thoughtfully. "It's quite empty."

Sir George spread out his hands. "But what are we going to do?"

"Shift the burden," said Francis. "I asked Dr. Tairlaine, and he didn't know, but I think you'll remember the name—you've heard of John Gaunt?"

Another silence. "I know John Gaunt very well," Sir George replied. "But he won't help us. The last time I heard of him, he was in Persia or somewhere. If you wanted to find him, you would have to send a letter addressed *poste restante*, The World. If he hasn't drunk himself to death by this time."

"As to the tippling, I don't know," said Francis. "But I do know that he isn't in Persia. He's no further away than the Globe Hotel at Aldbridge, playing very indifferent golf with a retired colonel from Brixton. Do you think we could get him?"

"Is it necessary?"

"Well, what do you think, sir?"

The baronet hesitated. "It's an idea," he admitted, rubbing his forehead. "But he's still pretty sensitive about—you know. At the rare intervals I've seen him, he's been sitting half asleep in the window of the Athenæum overlooking Pall Mall, and we never knew whether or not he was drunk. Generally, he's out of England altogether."

Twirling the cue, Sir George regarded it with a perplexed,

baffled admiration, as though he were about to make an admission against good taste.

He said abruptly: "They still tell tales about Gaunt, Frank. Medbury told me that one day he was sitting in his usual big wing-chair at the club window, and all of a sudden he jumped up from his chair, went to the telephone, and rang up Vine Street. 'There's a heavy-set man with square spectacles, wearing a trench-coat and a green felt hat,' he told the inspector, 'passing Waterloo Place just about now. You'd better hold him. You don't know it yet, but you'll want him for murder.' And sure enough, they found out later that the man had bashed in his wife's head, though they didn't find the body until two days afterwards. . . . Then," said Sir George, scowling, "there was the London-Liverpool bank robbery; you remember it? They nabbed Partington and two of his gang, but they couldn't find the stolen bearer-bonds. It was stalemate. Then the Commissioner got a note, one line scrawled on the wrapping of a tobacco package: '*In the bedpost, you bloody fool. Gaunt.*' And that's where Partington had hid the bonds. I know. The Commissioner told me so himself."

Sir George took out his cigar-case. He drew a deep breath and glanced at Francis, who did not seem to be listening.

"Saunders," the young man growled, "can't even seem to find our friend Kestevan. I say, excuse me. I think I ought to look into this—yes, and have a look into Irene's room. It's odd Doctor Manning isn't down yet. Excuse me, will you? Keep guard, and don't let anybody in."

He shambled out into the Great Hall, and Tairlaine watched Sir George curiously.

"I never heard the name," he said, "but just who is this man Gaunt?"

Again Sir George scowled. "John Gaunt," he responded slowly, "is probably the greatest criminological genius England ever had. There ought to be a book: '*Gaunt—His Rise and Fall.*' Both were spectacular."

"Was he connected with Scotland Yard?"

"Well, yes. In a way. If he hadn't been officially connected, there wouldn't have been such a break-up. Nobody could ever fathom exactly what his connection

with the Yard was. I never asked the Commissioner; not done."

"Break-up?"

"Well!" said the baronet uncomfortably, "well!—Mind, I don't say anything, but . . . In the first place he drank too much. That's nothing against him, of course; a gentleman's vice is never really considered a vice or people wouldn't tolerate it. Then, when his wife died about six or seven years ago, he seemed to go all to pieces. Erratic. He let an obviously guilty murderess go, once; helped her out of the country. Then, in the Saidley trial, where the Crown had a clear case, he caused a row in the dock; swore Saidley was innocent, but that they hadn't let him prove it. Again, he had a row about the use of scientific instruments at the Yard—Gaunt's of the old school, you see; the very old school. Whatever the reason, he severed relations with the Yard."

Sir George clipped a cigar carefully. The billiard cue slid down with a clack on the floor, and he did not pick it up.

"I met him one afternoon on the Embankment. It was just after his resignation. Tall, hollow-cheeked chap, with a moustache and tuft of whisker on his chin, like a picture of a cavalier. He said: "Modern!" "Scientific!" They're so God-damned scientific that they can't even see the truth. Come and have a drink."

"And what happened to him?"

"He was offered fabulous fees to go into private work, of course. But he's quite well off in his own right, and he refused. Very well-connected chap, you see; third son of the Viscount Barnehasset; you know? The only time he went into the lists was when old Grunz—the Viennese collector; know him?—had his Rembrandt stolen. That was because Grunz offered him a Corot if he took the case. It was a Corot Gaunt had been wanting for fifteen years. He recovered the Rembrandt in forty-eight hours, and sneered so hard at the Australian police that they had to hush the whole matter up. . . . But, so far as I know, he hasn't taken a case in some years. He's been travelling the world." Sir George seemed to have been talking, rapidly and almost incoherently, to avoid thinking of what lay in the armour hall. But he was growing uncomfortable. He added:

"Look here, I wonder what's happened to everybody? This doesn't seem *right*. Nobody hereabouts. . . ."

There was a pause. Then the Englishman rose slowly to his feet. His eyes encountered those of Tairlaine, and instinctively Tairlaine knew what was going on in his mind.

There are tangible atmospheres. What slid into Tairlaine's heart with a queer little call of dread may have been the absolute absence of noise here, save for the thin and plashing waterfall. There should have been footfalls along the stone galleries of the house. There should have been murmurs, the pulse of activity. But the blaze stirred and crackled in the fireplace, and that was all. . . . Sir George's face was an unhealthy colour.

"Something's wrong," he said. "Something *else*."

His voice fell hoarsely. Now, rising as with distant murmur, Tairlaine fancied he could hear those voices which should have been there in the first place. A door slammed dimly; then another. Into the brown drawing-room, with its sturdy red-shaded lamps and its furniture in stamped red leather, flowed that hum which had heretofore been strangled as surely as though it had been cut off by a bowstring.

There were slow footsteps in the Great Hall outside. Francis Steyne, very straight, came in and put his hand against the lintel of the door. The wall was so thick that he seemed like a figure in a niche, and it threw his face into shadow. None the less, he put up his other hand to shade his eyes.

"Gentlemen," he said, and gasped. "Gentlemen——"

Sir George's voice grew high. "Well? What is it? Did you find——?"

"Doris," said the other heavily.

"What?"

Putting his head against the cool stone, Francis spoke in a muffled voice.

"I can't stand this sort of thing much longer, you know. . . . They found her a few minutes ago, in the passage leading to the kitchen. She has been strangled. There is a string of pearls in her hand."

CHAPTER VI

IN THE SERVANTS' HALL

SHE had been very pretty in life. She was almost pretty in death, Tairlaine thought; though Doris Mundo's face was cyanosed and slightly swollen, and the eyes had rings of blood, it had not taken great pressure to crush the life from her throat. A delicate girl, whose neck might have been spanned by the fingers of a large man's hand. She had been dead only a few moments.

The whole scene, as Tairlaine stared down the passage at it, was printed on his brain in sharp and hideous colours. Out from the corridor opening on the dining-hall, an open passageway, fairly broad, ran some distance to the kitchens. Light fell into this passage both from the house-door at one end, and the kitchen at the other. She lay doubled up on the flagstones, her yellow hair disarranged beneath the lace cap. All about her the damp blackness of the stone walls towered up like a well, and above it they could see the sharp, clear stars in a sharp night sky.

As he looked over Sir George's shoulder, Tairlaine was conscious of open doors all about him, and that somebody was screaming. The butler, Wood, stood tall and shaking in the door of his pantry, one hand shading his eyes. A little fat woman, whom Tairlaine assumed to be the house-keeper, was peering about the door of her own room, and squawking out prayers.

"Ma'am," Wood said suddenly, "ma'am, that's heathenish. Please stop."

But one thing struck a real gong of horror in the cold place. It was the sound of voices rising in a hymn, and Tairlaine was conscious that it had been going on ever since they had pushed out to see the little limp figure in the shiny black frock. So lifelike was the beating surge and swell that the American did not for a moment realise it was a large radio-gramophone playing in Wood's quarters. Fervently, almost ecstatically, the full voices rang:

“Onward, Christian soldiers,
Marching as to war——”

Francis, a black silhouette with stooping shoulders in the lighted passage, stood staring down at the body.

“With the Cross of Jesus
Going on before.
Christ, the Royal Master,
Leads against the foe——”

“Get the doctor,” Sir George Anstruther said hoarsely, “and shut that damned thing off, Wood. Shut it off now; do you hear?”

Wood’s stiff lips framed, “Yes, sir.” He went shakily back into his room. An instant more the proud song marched with chanting, crying triumph against hell’s foundations. Then they heard a needle scratch wildly, a click, and silence.

Tairlaine wiped his forehead.

“These marks are distinct on her throat,” Francis said. He was kneeling by Doris Mundo, and with an instinctive gesture he had pulled down her skirt. “They run up to sharp points, you know, and here are the rib-marks, and the little squares of the chain-mail at the wrist. Yes. She was strangled with a pair of gauntlets.”

“Who found her?” demanded Sir George.

Wood turned blankly. His face was sharp in its frame of the lighted door; it had angles of shadow, so that he resembled a frightened Mephistopheles.

“I did, sir. Just a few moments ago.” He pulled at his collar. “I was playing *that*, you see, sir. It’s an electric one. It plays twelve records, one after the other, and Mrs. Carter likes the hymns, and . . .”

“How did you happen to find her?”

“It was time to lock up, sir. Fifteen minutes past ten. I came out of my door, and—and, well, there she was, sir.” He pointed. “I didn’t touch her. I knew who it was.”

“Poor little devil,” Francis muttered, rising. There was a silence.

“What did you do then?” asked Sir George.

"I—I tried to find his lordship, sir. To tell him. I went out into the Great Hall, and saw Mr. Francis going up the staircase, and I thought he might be more capable of handling such a situation than his lordship. But I didn't dare call out. I followed him upstairs, and then we both came down. . . ."

"You didn't know," said Sir George, "that his lordship had been murdered?"

Some muscle, some nervous jerk, seemed to wrench in Wood's leg. He almost literally fell, and had to seize the jamb of the door. He breathed, "Oh, my God," and looked across with dull and horrified fixity at the girl's body.

"We needn't go into that now," said Francis. "Wood, how long have you been in your quarters?"

"Since I served the coffee, sir. *All the time.* I saw you and Sir George going down the passage towards the billiard-room, sir, and I heard you speak of playing, and then I shut my door——"

"Didn't you leave at any time?"

"No, sir. I swear I didn't."

"Then why didn't you answer my ring from the billiard room? I couldn't seem to rouse you."

Wood put his hand to his forehead. He seemed puzzled and flustered that he was being questioned. Rather a handsome head for the man's age, Tairlaine thought, studying him; none of your portly, majestic major-domos with winy jowls, and decidedly a cut above the average.

Wood said: "I'm sorry, sir. It must have been the music. But I didn't hear you. I'm sorry, sir."

"When did you last see her alive?"

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure. It was this afternoon, I think. There was that unfortunate affair . . ."

A harsh, insistent, somehow *burrowing* voice wormed in. Mrs. Carter smoothed her skirts aggressively, and said:

"I'll tell you what 'appened, Mr. Francis; not that we all don't know it." She pointed at the girl's body. "Anybody knows I'm the last one to be speaking ill of the dead. But *she*—she was a bad, wicked, immoral girl, Mr. Francis. I only hope God'll have proper mercy on 'er soul."

It bit Francis to his first snap of irritation.

"Oh, chuck it! Never mind that now. What happened? When did *you* see her last?"

"Very good, sir. *Very good!*—Well, then, I'll tell you. I knew what was wrong with 'er; you can't fool me. You never can, about them things. I told 'is lordship, and I 'ad 'im fetch Doctor Manning . . . well, that is, I told Miss Patricia, and she did it. Then I sent Doris up to 'er room, where she and Annie sleep. That would be near six-thirty. The doctor didn't get 'ere till near eight. I was right," said Mrs. Carter, nodding grimly.

"What then?"

"Then the doctor, 'e 'ad a talk with 'is lordship, Mr. Francis. I didn't 'ear it. Doris was up in the room. 'Is lordship wanted the doctor to stop for dinner, but the doctor wasn't dressed, and 'e being a very proper gentleman, and being hungry too, asked if 'e could have a snack sent into the Trophy Room. There was boiled beef. And we did. And——"

"This isn't getting us anywhere," Francis interrupted. "When was the last time you saw Doris?"

"*Then* was the last time, sir; didn't I tell you that? She was in 'er room, where I'd made 'er stop until we decided what to do. We couldn't have a bad, wicked example like that corrupting the other 'ousemaids by being with 'em. I made Annie promise to sleep in the other rooms, with Nellie and Jane, and that's that."

Francis said bitterly: "No. You couldn't have Annie contaminated, could you?" His face was cut into strange lines by something like pain. He slapped his hands together. "I tell you we're going to find the swine who strangled that poor kid. . . . Look here, Sir George: you know John Gaunt, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then help us—will you? We can't have fools messing about in this affair. He's at the Globe Hotel, down by the links. Get somebody to drive you down, and rout him out. Offer him anything. If he won't take money . . . what's he interested in, sir?"

"Pictures. Old books. Horses. Yes, and armour, now that I remember it——"

"Good! There we are. There's a Meissonnier in the

gallery. And a first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* with Coleridge's name on the fly-leaf. And the best horseflesh in Suffolk. . . . Tell him he can take anything, and the whole damned collection of armour, if he likes. Only *get him here.*"

Sir George glanced up under tufted eyebrows. "I say, Frank. This seems to have cut you up worse than your father's death."

Francis's voice grew high. "He was a dirty murdering swine, whoever he was," Francis said. "And I'll see him hang, by God, if it's the last thing I ever do."

A deep, rolling, clerical voice boomed down the passage, saying, "Dreadful! Dreadful!" Adjusting his gold glasses, Dr. Manning loomed up before the stolid figure of Saunders. Sir George nodded and withdrew as the doctor bent over Doris's body. When he turned her over on her back, nobody glanced at the face except Francis, who stood quietly, with a white dullness round his eyes.

The doctor straightened up.

"It's almost the same sort of case, my boy," he remarked. "She was nearly as frail as your father; and her condition—you understand? The blood wasn't strong. Shock, as much as anything else. Dead . . . well, ten or fifteen minutes at the outside. These are rather curious marks on her throat."

"Gauntlets," said Francis. "The murderer took them along."

"Ah," murmured the doctor. His big forehead was wrinkled as he polished his glasses. "Ah, quite so. That would do it, of course. I have—ah—already taken the liberty of sending Lee to Aldbridge for Inspector Tape. Your mother took the other news quite well. I have just been telling her."

Francis nodded. "That will be most helpful," he replied, and whether by accident or design his ordinarily lazy and drawling voice imitated the doctor's tones. "We also have taken a liberty. Sir George is going to the Globe Hotel after John Gaunt."

Dr. Manning replaced his glasses. Tairlaine saw a curious expression on his large, carefully shaven face.

"The detective," he said. "I see. Well——"

"Anything more to tell us, Doctor?"

"I fear not. You noticed, of course, the string of pearls in her hand? They seem very fine pearls."

"I noticed them. They are fine pearls. It is a string we all picked out to give Irene on her birthday." Francis hesitated, drumming his lip as Massey came quietly down the corridor. Massey glanced only once at the still form out under the stars; then he shut his lips tight. "I say, Bruce," Francis went on, "if you feel up to it, you might have a look at those pearls. I'm fairly sure they're the right ones."

There was a little quiver in Massey's heavy face. But he only nodded and went to the body. When he held up the girl's thin, white right arm, a tumbling white shimmer glowed down between the clenched fingers.

"These are the pearls," he said.

"Where were they being kept?"

"In one of the two safes. Either the safe in the office, or the safe in his own room. I don't know which; he kept shifting his things from one safe to the other. He said it was for protection. I don't see how . . . Anyway, the last time I saw them they were in the office safe."

"Could she have got into either safe?"

Massey's slow and bewildered eyes moved up. He had to use one hand to push himself up from the floor. He said dully, "My God, *anybody* could have got in. The combinations are both written up on the walls. . . . But why should she have——?"

"We're wasting time. I know we're wasting time, somehow," snapped Francis, beating a hand against his temple, "but I'm dashed if I know what to do. We shall have to take a look at both of those safes. I say. Another thing. He generally kept big sums of money at hand, didn't he?"

Massey's mouth fell open a trifle. He started hurriedly back along the corridor, and then hesitated. "If this is robbery, Frank—if this is robbery—I hadn't thought . . . Well, there are ten bearer-bonds of a thousand pounds each in the office safe. I know, because I took down the serial numbers only a day or so ago."

"And cash?"

"Cash box in the desk drawer. There's money in it, but he keeps the key himself, and I don't know how much."

"When were you there last?"

"In the office? Hold on a bit!" urged the secretary, blinking desperately to arrange his thoughts. "Why, just after dinner. I typed down a letter from a dictaphone, and got rid of the profanity; then he didn't turn up—I knew he wouldn't—so I set out to look for him. That would be . . . oh, hang it, I don't remember. Before nine-thirty, I should say. Everything was all right then. At least, I think it was. I didn't examine the safe."

"Listen," said Francis, suddenly taking his hand away from his eyes. "He's been raving about that letter for days. Was it very important? I mean——"

Massey seemed uncomfortable. Tairlaine thought of that moon-face in the German clock, patiently and tirelessly going round the dial, year after year.

"I didn't shave the dictaphone record," the secretary said. "Let's avoid the suggestion of a bally row, shall we? Suppose you listen to the record yourself. I mean, hang it——" He lifted his arms.

Dr. Manning surprised them by saying: "His lordship was an odd man, my boy. Very odd. Nobody should know it better than yourself. And he had—vagaries. It is unfortunate." Clicking shut the catch of his medicine-kit with a loud snap, he moved out past them. "And might I suggest: this corridor is scarcely the place for a conference, is it?"

"Righto. We'll adjourn to the library. I suppose we don't dare disturb the—disturb her until the police get here. . . . I say, Wood!"

"Yes, sir?"

"A bit of investigating: do you mind? Let's see. The footmen don't sleep in the house. Still, they might have seen something. Go out and stir them up. If you find out anything, we shall be in the library."

Wood was regaining his composure. He was reaching up to smooth down his greying hair, but he seemed to detect something of impropriety in the act, and stopped.

"Very good, sir. . . . They will all be in bed, of course."

Naturally, sir, with the exception of Saunders there. *He——?* ”

Saunders did not even blink his eyes. “ I give Mr. Francis ’is night-cap every night,” he remarked in a matter-of-fact voice, to nobody in particular. “ I’ve given it him every night since I come ’ere. But I don’t know anything except—well, sir, I’ll keep it. For a bit, anyways.”

“ You’re a dashed observant lad, Saunders. Come along with us, then. Mrs. Carter . . . ? ”

“ Well, sir; I’m ’ere. I’m waiting.”

“ Wake up the maids, will you, please? Try not to frighten them, but find out if they know anything, and then come into the library. And the cook? ”

Mrs. Carter gave a little harsh whinny which was startlingly like Lord Rayle. It was like the ghost in the place of death, and Tairlaine jumped.

“ Mrs. Bounder? ’Er? ” demanded the housekeeper. “ Stone deaf, she is, sir. She’s slept all through this, I’ll be bound. All the same, I’ll see.”

Francis looked round the circle.

“ We’re all here,” he said, scowling, “ except—oh, yes. Pat. Where did you leave her, Bruce? ”

“ In her room. I was sitting with her.” Again Massey hesitated. “ She didn’t want female consolation, she said. She didn’t—I mean, she didn’t want to disturb Mrs. Carter. Saunders dropped in to tell me about *this*. But she doesn’t know yet. I mixed her a sleeping dose.”

“ Then we’re all accounted for. Irene in her room, and . . . ” Francis whistled. “ I say, there’s an absent member. Where’s the dancing beauty? Where’s Kestevan? Has anybody seen him? ”

“ I went in to fetch him, like you told me,” Saunders replied. “ ’E ’ad on a bathrobe like a blinking rainbow—one of them Chinese things, with big sleeves—and ’e was writing. ’E said ’e ’ad to change ’is clothes, and then ’e’d be down. Begging your pardon, sir; I think ’e’s a-coming now.”

For some time Tairlaine had been conscious of somebody in the background, peering towards the group, trying to see over shoulders and through the crooks of elbows. Saunders’s stolid words brought out Kestevan like a cue-line. Only his

nostrils in the pale, rather Italian face seemed agitated; they moved a trifle, and had kinks coming and going at their corners as though Kestevan were breathing hard. His hands kept straying to the sides of his coat.

"I'm here," he told them in his rather shrill voice. "Do you want me to come any closer?"

"She won't hurt you," said Francis. "Come and look at her; tell us if you've noticed her before."

"Certainly," the other said with dignity. His highly-polished shoes moved along the yellow matting of the corridor like black mirrors. Gingerly he thrust out his head into the passage, as though he were sniffing the night air. "Why, sure," he added, turning back. "Sure, I've seen her. She's a real pretty girl. I've seen her. Come to think of it, I saw her to-night."

"Where? When?"

"She had good legs," Kestevan said blankly. "She looked a little like my leading woman."

"When did you see her?"

"Oh, around. And to-night. After dinner, when I was upstairs. . . . She was—sure, I remember; she looked like my leading woman. She was going into Ir—into Lady Rayle's room."

There was a silence. Kestevan was edging himself away from the vicinity of the body.

"Into Lady Rayle's room?" Francis repeated. "That's funny; or isn't it? I mean to say—Dr. Manning, weren't you with Irene all evening? Did you see Doris come in?"

The doctor pursed his lips. "Why, yes; that is, almost all evening. But I came downstairs to look at your father, you know. Yes. And before that, I recall, I was out of the room for some time. You see, it was my car. I was afraid I might have left the engine running. Naturally I didn't want to trouble one of the servants on what might be merely a trick of memory. So I went downstairs to investigate. I had not left the engine running, by the way. . . . Possibly that is when the poor girl came in. I can't say. I didn't see her."

"When did you go down about the car, Doctor?"

"Ah," said Manning reflectively. He cocked his head

on one side. "Really, my boy, I shouldn't like to say precisely. Nine-thirty. A bit later or earlier, possibly."

"Was that the time you saw Doris?" Francis asked Kestevan.

"Saw——? Oh, you mean the girl who looked like my leading woman?" said Kestevan. "I don't know. I never notice those things. I left you people, and went straight upstairs. To write to my aunt," he explained, somewhat self-consciously, as though he were mentioning an unusual achievement in knowing how to write. "So I just went upstairs, and I don't know."

Saunders moved from one leg to the other. "Excuse me, sir," he broke in, "and begging your pardon. But what 'e says, you see, I'm afraid it ain't true. Not exactly, anyhow."

Kestevan's nervous hands became motionless, and his breath seemed to stop. He tilted up his chin.

"I mean," Saunders went on patiently, "I'm not contradicting 'im, sir, about later, when 'e saw Doris. I mean 'e didn't go upstairs straightaway. 'E went out in the back courtyard towards the door of the donjohn."

For a moment the feathers seemed to rise on Kestevan's back. But he was still expressionless. He became conscious of the silence, and of eyes turned on him.

"You," he said, "you. That's a dirty lie. You be careful, or I'll have you fired."

A short quaver ran through his voice. Saunders only examined the yellow matting of the corridor. "Well, sir, that's up to Mr. Francis, you see. But you did do it. I saw you."

"May I again suggest something?" put in Dr. Manning. The oratorical roll of his voice was heavy with annoyance.

"May I suggest that we take our troubles out of the servants' quarters? We have been standing here——"

"Come along," said Francis.

Nobody spoke. The group moved out, away from the chill of the wind that had begun to stir through the passage door from that well where Doris lay. Tairlaine glanced back. Mrs. Carter's greedy little eyes were still picking up the crumbs of what had been said. Still framed against the light of his own door, Wood—a shaken Mephistopheles, with hair as heavy as a casque—remained motionless for a

long time. Tairlaine was teased by a curious sensation of having seen something like that picture before. . . .

But when he glanced back again, Wood was going out quietly with a red blanket in his hands, to put it over Doris's stiffening body.

CHAPTER VII

ENTER JOHN GAUNT

WHEN they were again in the Great Hall, Francis whirled about to face Kestevan.

"Do you know," he remarked almost lazily, "I have good reason to believe Saunders was telling the truth. Bruce knows what I mean, and so does Dr. Tairlaine."

The kinks came and went rapidly in Kestevan's nostrils. He bent forward, to speak almost fiercely. "You don't like me, Steyne," he said. "You thought you were kidding me. Well, you weren't, with all your high-hat talk. I understood. And I don't like you, either, with all your airs. If you don't want to take my word, you can go to hell. See?"

"Little man," the other said gently, "if this were any other time, I should damned well knock your face in. I may do it yet, you know. Which would be a tragedy."

He struck a match indolently and lit a cigarette. In Kestevan's face shone a sort of pale anger, like a dull gas-globe. He wanted to talk, and appeared not to know what to say.

"But I'll tell you this," continued Francis earnestly. "We shall have to tell the police about Pat being in that room, of course. But for the rest of it, we shan't say a word. She was there to look at the armour, and nothing more. . . . You never went out to the donjon, and found the door nailed up on the outside as she found it nailed up on the inside. Your word is accepted, and Saunders's story is a myth. But, as soon as we can conveniently do it, you'll get out of here."

"Will I?" inquired Kestevan. "Will I? Just in case you don't know it, I'm your mother's guest. She invited

me. She is the big noise around here now, and what she says goes. Get it?"

"Steady, Frank!" said Massey, putting his hand on Francis's arm.

"Oh, well," said Francis. He drew deeply on his cigarette. "Kestevan, we're going upstairs. You wouldn't be of any service, so you're not coming along. . . . Nevertheless, Kestevan, you're departing hence. With speed. I mean to say: otherwise you won't be in shape to face a Kleig light for a month. Get *that*? Come along, gentlemen."

In silence the four of them, Francis, Tairlaine, Massey, and Dr. Manning, went down the Great Hall and up along the thick-carpeted stair.

"Do you know," the young man observed thoughtfully, "or possibly you hadn't noticed—that man's a type I thoroughly detest. I don't mind his being pretty. It isn't that; he can't help it. I do dislike his being both pretty and brainless, like a woman. Or maybe he can't help that, either . . . God knows. Let's have a look at the office first."

The long portrait gallery at the head of the stairs glittered with candles. Behind a railing of red cord, the darkened colours of the pictures glowed with sober richness. Francis waved his hand towards them.

He said: "There we are. A foul lot, really. That thin-looking bloke with the long legs and the ruff is Charles Steyne. They chopped his head off for high treason. . . . The fat one in the red robes, the one with the nasty eye, is Justice Humphrey Steyne. Also caught for high treason during the Bloody Assize; and sentenced by his fellow-judge, Jeffreys, by the way. There's insanity in that lot. No denying my old man was touched. And very often"—he ran a hand over a rather haggard face, as though he were feeling it to reassure himself it was his own—"very often I suspect *I'm* cracked, too. I never have been able to think anything in the world was very serious; not even sport. My mind gets blank. And, d'ye know, when I was talking to that little blighter downstairs—who's quite harmless—I had a fearful impulse to toss him all over the floor and trample him. Bad. I don't like it."

"Now, now, my boy," interposed Dr. Manning, in his

large and benevolent way, "this whole thing has been a bit of a strain." He smiled, seeming to feel himself on sure ground now. "You mustn't let it affect you. What you need is a drink."

"England, my England!" said Francis, raising his hand. "The only thing that can ever be wrong with anybody is the climate, and the only thing that can cure it is whisky. I know. Round this way, gentlemen. . . . Here's the alleged 'office.' If you'll turn the lights on, Bruce . . ."

They stood motionless as the lights went up, blinking.

"Somebody's been here, right enough," said Massey, after a pause. "And in a hurry."

It was a small room with two windows, and filing cabinets in dull slate-coloured steel. A green-shaded lamp hung over a typewriter desk, where the rubber cover had not quite been pulled back over the machine. Beside it was a covered dictaphone on a stand, with a circle of cardboard cylinders for the records just beneath. Papers had been piled neatly on the desk, but that was the only neat part of the room. A picture had been knocked off the wall, splattering glass on the floor, to show a wall-safe partly open. There were fallen papers round it. A swivel chair had been knocked over, and a pile of what appeared to be gardening catalogues pitched off a revolving bookcase. Just in the middle of the floor lay a long velvet-covered box, open, to show a white satin lining.

"There's the box the pearls were in," said Massey, picking it up. "I don't know whether we should disturb this, but we've got to look in that safe."

"Wait a bit!" Francis said. "Don't put your hands on that safe. They always raise the devil about fingerprints, but I never knew any story where they found any—did you? All the same, be careful. Take my handkerchief."

Dr. Manning bent closer, adjusting his eyeglasses as Massey edged the steel door open. "There are three or four combinations written on the wall, right enough," the doctor said. "The last one is clear enough. What's inside?"

"Cleaned," said Massey, and knocked his knuckles on the wall with a sort of dry fury. "I shall catch it for this. Good God, I shall probably be blamed altogether. Unless his confounded bonds are in the other safe, in the bedroom

... I've managed his affairs for six years, and I think I've done well, and now there won't be another job for me in England. Look."

Tairlaine peered inside. There were some batches of papers, bound with rubber bands; a dusty book with a padded leather cover, inscribed in florid gilt lettering, *Tennyson's Poems*; and there was a small silver bowl of sugar. Nothing else.

"A relic of the first Lady Rayle," said Massey, touching the book. "There was a queer streak of sentiment——"

"They've been into the desk, too," Francis remarked from behind. He was staring owlishly at one drawer. "There's a key in that drawer. Is that where he kept the cash-box?"

Still using the handkerchief, Massey drew open the drawer, where an empty japanned box lay upside-down. "Whoever did this," said the secretary, "got his keys. They were always on his watch-chain."

Still Francis's attention had wandered. Drawing the cover off the dictaphone, he was contemplating it with that same owlish gaze. The flexible tube with glass mouthpiece and controlling button hung on its hook. Under the pointer which scored the wax, a cylinder had been fitted on the revolving holder; by the faint, thin grooves in the wax they could see that the record had been completed.

Francis remarked suddenly: "There's a lot of nonsense talked about dictaphones in stories. The voice isn't much louder than a voice over a telephone, and it squeaks like the devil. It's distinguishable, right enough, but you could never turn it on and imagine it was a real man talking behind a door—that's only the quaint stuff they have in fiction. . . . Let's see. How does one work the thing?"

"You talk into that mouthpiece," said the secretary, "and hold down the control button. When you release it, the record stops. If you want to hear it, you just reverse that pointer and the voice comes out of the mouthpiece. I generally use the head-phones; saves time."

Francis took the tube off its hook and pressed a button at the base. There was a whir; the cylinder began to revolve with a faint droning noise. Another click as Francis pressed the control button. Out of the tube popped a high, squeaky

voice, very thin and loud in the quiet room. It was Lord Rayle's voice upraised, eerie under the green-shaded lamp.

It squawked:

"Massey, you young pup, take a letter, and mind you write what I say. Ha. Now listen to me. *Listen*. This is to my solicitor. Now." A slight whirring pause. "Drat the bloody devil's luck, I can't find the address. You know it. You ought to. Simpson and Simpson. Pump Court, Inner Temple. D'ye hear?"

"He used the thing," Massey put in, "chiefly to relieve his mind. He knew I had to listen."

"Pump Court, Inner Temple," squeaked the voice, rising to falsetto with aggrieved insistence. "'Gentlemen.' No. No. Ha. I always make that mistake. I will *not* call that damned old ass a gentleman, do you hear? Strike it out. Just say 'sirs.' That's bad enough too, but how the hell, I ask you, can you say anything else? 'Sirs.' Have you got that? 'In re'—now what does *that* mean, anyway?—'in re the third or fourth or whatever it is'; fix that up, Massey—'in re the last draft of my will, anyway, I want another change. Oh, yes. And let me add, sir—this is for you, Hartley Simpson; do you hear?—let me add that the port you served me at your house last August wasn't fit for a swine. In re this new change, I want a bequest stricken out. I don't know how you do it, but *do* it. It's about that dithering idiot, Dr. Horatio Manning. H-o-r-a-t-i-o, as in Hamlet——'"

Dr. Manning said: "Oh, look here——!"

Another whirring pause from the machine. "I can't find the bloody sugar!" it proclaimed. "Somebody's always hiding the sugar, when I want to eat some. . . . Don't put that in the letter, Massey, you fool; strike it out. Where was I? Oh, yes. About Hamlet. 'Sirs: Horatio Manning wants to found a clinic to put bugs in babies, or some such rot. I said he could have fifteen thousand. Well, he won't get a single, round, blithering halfpenny, and you can tell him so from me. A man who holds his opinions about the inscriptions found on the hulls of the Danish ships—no, no, you wouldn't be interested in that, Hartley; what do you know about it?—Danish ships in Haml—nonsense! Not that. Anyway, he doesn't get a single, round, blithering

halfpenny. That's what I want to tell you. Give it to my wife instead, like the rest of the estate. Lady Rayle wants to produce a motion picture. Well, she won't until *I'm* gone, but give her the money, Hartley, and for God's sake serve better port to your guests than you did to me. . . . Er, I remain, respectfully yours, etc.' There. Now mind you get that letter done to-morrow, Massey; mind! See that I send it off. . . ."

Francis's thumb slid off the control-button, and the voice stopped, though the cylinder continued to whirl.

Forcing a large and amused smile, the doctor cleared his throat. He said:

"I think I told you, my dear Frank, that your father was an eccentric man. He was for ever putting people into his will and striking them out a week later. I think you can confirm that, Mr. Massey?"

"Oh, yes," the other replied wearily. "He said three or four drafts. It was more like fifteen. The big difficulty was in translation. I'd got to speak Raylese quite well."

Francis shut off the machine. "Still and all, look here. This thing raises an interesting point. Is it legal? This is obviously his voice, and theoretically Bruce is a witness. . . . I rather fancy it's not legally binding, but I still wonder. H'm."

There was a strained silence. Nobody was certain of the right thing to say, and Dr. Manning was growing more and more frigid in manner.

"The other safe," said Francis; "in his bedroom, you know. We'd better look at it."

They went round in the dimly-lighted halls, still not speaking much. Massey tried to carry on a conversation by explaining the arrangement of rooms.

"His rooms—bedroom and dressing-room—and Lady Rayle's too, are in a line at the other side of the house. By the way, you mustn't expect to see anything but a mess. He lived in a sort of pigsty; tried working there once, but the litter was too much. He keeps notes for a book he's always been threatening to write, about the history of arms, and his notes are thrown about all over the place. Mind the step; this is an outside corridor."

They went out of an arched door, into the coolness of the

night. All along this side, the four rooms opened, with a door and window each, on a covered balcony overlooking the inner, or rear, courtyard of the castle. The moon was high now, probing with bluish light into the vast quadrangle of this court. They could see the battlements clear-cut against the sky; the brutish strength of the donjon-keep at one corner, and the light Gothic spires of the small chapel built against the extreme rear wall. Up ahead, the illuminated windows of the Great Hall bloomed red and blue against darkness. Lighted by two murky electric bulbs, the covered passage—held up by square arches, like those of the cloister immediately beneath—ran its great length past the doors and windows.

“It’s the most uncomfortable part of the castle,” said Massey to Tairlaine, “and devilish hard to heat. But he would have his rooms here, and he insisted on Lady Rayle’s being here too. . . . What is it?”

Tairlaine was leaning over the stone balustrade, peering down into the court. By craning his neck he could follow the top of the round donjon, and the flagstaff thin on a moonlit sky.

“This door to the donjon,” he said, “the one he nailed up: where is it? I can see a cloister, going to the chapel, and there seem to be rooms opening off it, like these. But where is the door?”

“They’re bedrooms. We never use them; too damp. The door to the donjon is in the one at the end. Kestevan . . .”

The roof-tiles were growing silver with moonlight, but a mist had begun to rise. The noise of the waterfall, rising and roaring, was sharpened against silence. Francis, standing tall with his hand on one arch, stared out at the forest of chimney-stacks built up in crooked and mysterious roofs.

“I say, that reminds me,” the young man asserted in a far-away voice. “Kestevan said he saw Doris coming out of Irene’s rooms. . . . What do you suppose he was doing wandering along a breezy place like this? Is he addicted to the charm of Bowstring by moonlight? I doubt it.”

He roused himself and followed the others down the passage. Lights shone in the window of one room, and

Massey said, "Lady Rayle's place. We can stop there going back. Here we are."

"What is on the other side of these rooms?" Tairlaine inquired. "A blank wall? They don't seem to have any other means of lighting."

Francis scowled. "Oh, that? That's the armour hall. Those dummy windows look into it. And so——"

"I don't suppose there's any chance of the murderer having left that way?" inquired Dr. Manning.

"None," said Francis. "We tested them. All the same, we shall have to look at the locks from the inside. Is the door open, Bruce?"

Massey's voice was muffled. "It's open," he said, stumbling, "but there's the other damned thing. He wouldn't have electricity in his bedroom or dressing-room. . . . Hold hard while I strike a light."

A gleam sprang up, then another and another, as Massey went about lighting candles. It was impossible, Tairlaine thought, to tell whether this bedroom had been ransacked or not. It was a fairly large place with a high ceiling, where the candle-flames shone murkily, and in a wild state of disorder. The canopied bed had not been made; nor did the sheets seem to have been changed for some days. There was a table, splattered with ink and candle-grease, and so many papers that a cyclone could have blown them no more. A closet door sagged open, to show a very damp interior, ghostly with half a dozen grimy white robes hanging there. The mosaic window glittered dully.

"Hallo," said Massey. "Here's a flashlight. I never knew him to use one of these. But it's better than candles. The safe is behind that tapestry beside the bed."

A long white beam from the flashlight played across the room. Approaching the tapestry, Massey stumbled over several pairs of shoes and a red woollen undershirt. He lifted the tapestry, and they peered behind. Another wall-safe, similar in pattern to the first, was closed but not locked.

There was nothing inside but a dry bottle of ink, some withered quill pens with once bright feathers, and a china bowl of sugar. The personality of the gabbling little peer walked in the room now, as palpable as the stale air. He

was everywhere. To place your hand on any article of furniture was to touch one of those soiled monk's robes.

Massey closed the safe.

"I could keep the office tidy," he said apologetically, "but no maid ever dared come in here. He wouldn't permit it. Well . . . what now?"

"Give me that flashlight, Bruce," said Francis; "and let's try all these windows. Here we are. . . . No, No, it won't do. Locked."

They were heavy locks, made of brass, and twisting into position rather like the porthole of a ship. Clearly they could not have been tampered with, and it was only with a wrench that Manning, Francis, and Massey loosened them at all.

"The other rooms now," said Francis. "The dressing-room, and then we'll go to see Irene."

The dressing-room window also was locked. Dusting his hands, Francis uttered a few high-coloured words as he put the flashlight back in his pocket.

When they knocked at the door of Lady Rayle's dressing-room, there was a long silence. Then a musical, but slightly metallic, voice told them to come in.

The room was so abrupt a change and contrast that Tairlaine blinked. If Lord Rayle had been a medievalist, there was no question of his wife's standing as a modern. The decorators had done their best with wall designs in brilliant lines and angles; in pale white lamps concentrated on mirrors, and a sort of alabaster sheen which was hard on the eyes. On chairs and lounges, there were silver pipes and pinions in such profusion that they seemed to have been designed by a slightly cross-eyed plumber. The cushions also had angles, and were contrived seemingly without a knowledge of human anatomy.

On one of these lounges, Lady Rayle sat under a staggering lamp. There were chocolates beside her, a dog, and half a dozen French novels with titles all containing the word "*l'amour*." To Tairlaine's uncomfortable soul, it all appeared in bad taste without the virtue of being funny.

But Lady Rayle was neither funny nor in bad taste. The decorations glared about her like too much mascara on a beautiful face. She herself was beautiful: very pale red

hair combed over her ears, heavy reddish eyebrows, and smoky yellow-green eyes in a square and pale face. Her neck was strong, like her strong and well-kept hands, and she was smiling faintly.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she said.

A fine, rather deep voice. You were conscious of at least two things: that she cordially detested her stepson, and that there was about her nothing of the quality called Nonsense. You suspected also that she had been a singer connected with musical comedy.

"I know what you are thinking," she observed suddenly. "You are wondering that I show no grief at my husband's death. Come now; let's face it. There was never anything of particular affection between us. For me to grieve would be hypocritical. I detest hypocrisy. In this day and age, we have almost done with it." She smiled frequently, and rather too mechanically.

Francis spoke amiably. He said: "I'm sorry, Irene. You've cheated us out of the luxury of sympathising with you. . . . Dr. Tairlaine, this is my mother."

She almost laughed. "Of course. I know you. Sir George Anstruther has spoken of you frequently. You are—d'you mind?—the author of some rather stuffy books on the Victorian novel. I detest that sort of writing." Her eyes moved to an angular bookcase where some paperbacks glared with red titles. For a moment she fondled the villainous little dog beside her; it barked and looked malevolent, after the fashion of such. "That's out of date. We want truth now; truth, power, baldness. What I call body. D'you mind?"

"I think I have heard it so defined, somewhere, Lady Rayle," Tairlaine said thoughtfully. He knew then that there was antagonism between them.

She said: "Don't you agree with me?" rather sharply.

Francis straddled a chair. "I say, Irene, we did come here to discuss that subject, you know. A body, anyhow. Doris Mundo's."

"Oh," she said, and pinched the dog's neck. "What about Doris?"

"Was she up here to-night, by any chance?"

"She was."

"Well?"

"I always rather liked Doris," Lady Rayle answered. She spoke as though she were bargaining with a shopkeeper, and refusing to come down on her price. "But the girl's a little fool. She'd got to go."

"That's a bit rough on the girl, don't you think? Why?"

"I have no concern with people's morals," said Lady Rayle. The Pekinese slurred and barked nastily. "But a girl who allows herself to become pregnant is simply a fool. I cannot abide fools of that description. You perceive that I am frank. Why not?"

Francis was whistling softly between his teeth. "Well, don't concern yourself. She's gone already. I mean to say, she's dead. Somebody strangled her half an hour ago."

He got up slowly from his chair.

Lady Rayle sat without motion, her smoky eyes fixed on him. Straight and hard. At length she inquired: "Is this a joke?" and her hand strayed out towards the dog again.

"No."

Another pause. "I am sorry. Genuinely sorry."

"Did she stay here with you long to-night?"

"No. Not long. She wished me to intercede for her with my husband. I was sorry, as I told her, but it was impossible."

"Quite. . . . When was she here?"

"While Dr. Manning had gone downstairs to see about his car. She had not wanted to face him again. I had to tell her that I was not particularly moved by her tears. Tears are old-fashioned."

Francis nodded. "By the way," he said casually, "were you the one who invited Lawrence Kestevan here?"

"Yes. I am a great admirer of his art." She hesitated, somewhat warily. "I'm bound to tell you, Frank, that when this business subsides I may produce a talking picture and play opposite him. I want to get back to the cinema again."

"Well," said Francis, "well. I thought I should tell you. I'm bound to answer that when this business subsides I shall kick the bloody little gigolo out of the house. . . . Good-night, Irene."

She was white. Her lips were suddenly pulled square like

a Greek mask. For a moment Tairlaine thought that she would throw the chocolate box; and Francis smiled. He was very easy, and behind him stood a candlelit gallery where men's pictures stood in the stiffness of darkening paint.

But there was no scene. A knock at the door allowed her to arrange her smile. It was Wood.

"Excuse me, sir," he said. "Inspector Tape has arrived. Sir George Anstruther is with him, and a Mr. John Gaunt. Shall I say you will come down?"

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT WAS THAT CLICK?

BEFORE the fire in the library, a tall and thin man was warming his hands at the blaze. Sir George took Tairlane in to meet him while Francis was explaining the situation to Inspector Tape in the Great Hall.

Only a brief glance had Tairlane been given of the inspector. But he seemed exactly right. He had the soldierly bearing of a sergeant-major, and large blue pop-eyes which he kept wide open in a fixed and disconcerting, if rather blank, stare. Above all, his narrow face was ornamented by one of the largest red moustaches Tairlane had ever seen outside France; it was waxed out on either side of his mouth in straight points as long as knitting-needles. Inspector Tape sharpened these points with thumb and forefinger as he inclined his head on one side, pulling down long wrinkles around his mouth, and listened to Francis talk.

But Tairlane was interested in John Gaunt. Unsociably, Gaunt had sought the library fire alone. The American had been prepared for somebody rather surly, probably ill-tempered, and certainly glazed with a polite sneer. Therefore he was astonished when Gaunt turned about. A conservative—an old school parliamentarian—rather like himself, Tairlane fancied, carrying courtesy to an extreme point.

In appearance Sir George had described him accurately. There was the lean figure, buttoned up in an old-style dinner-coat with a tie almost like a black stock, and down his shirt-front hung an eyeglass on a black ribbon. There was the long head with high cheek-bones, and the silvering hair brushed straight and long back from a high forehead. The grey eyes, under black brows, were drowsy, dull, and almost kindly. That moustache and tuft of whisker in the middle of his chin made him resemble a Franz Hals cavalier grown thin. He was slightly drunk, but it was only by close observation that you saw that, though the reek of brandy was strong. Down under his eyes, round his mouth, and in fine lines across his leathery forehead, ran the wrinkles of one who has beheld much villainy, and has grown sleepy with it. A burnt-out man, you would have said, yet still ringed with danger; a throwback to more perilous days—polite, quiet, deadly, with a flavour of the college cloisters about him, and half asleep.

He extended a long hand and smiled.

"I've heard of you, of course, Dr. Tairlaine," he said. And Tairlaine quite suddenly felt that he was going to like this man. "I attended several of your public lectures at Cambridge last year. Your papers on Thackeray were especially good; quite as good, I should think, as Thackeray's own on the English humorists, and with much the same flavour. Permit me to congratulate you."

Tairlaine bowed.

"Thank you, Mr. Gaunt. You've—what's the word—taken the case?"

"I've taken the case," said Gaunt. His eyes were turned inwards, with irony. He looked at Sir George. The pleasantness was not quite so apparent. "By the way, George," he went on slowly, "I met the Commissioner in Paris, quite by accident, a month or so ago. He was with Dr. Blanchard of the *Sûreté*, and they favoured me with some interesting facts about myself. The word, I think, was 'fogy.' I am outmoded. The progress of modern science . . . I took the case, yes. One last fling, my dear George; a wild oat before I go on. A man can't drink in peace in England."

"Did George tell you about——?"

"A little. I should like to hear your own story, Doctor, before the inspector begins his inquisition."

He drew out a tall chair beside the fire. It had sunk lower now, a sullen red play around whitening logs. Gaunt, sitting very straight with the carven chair-back towering over him, was in shadow.

"One thing," he said thoughtfully, "before I see the bodies. . . . George, you used to be a good amateur draughtsman. While Dr. Tairlaine is telling me about the event, would you mind drawing me a rough plan of the house—upstairs and down? One can't wander about so big a place as this and still understand the arrangement of rooms. . . . Thank you. And—if you don't mind—a decanter of brandy . . . ?"

Sir George rang for Wood and sent him after the brandy. Then he sat down, drawing out a large envelope, and began to sketch. Tairlaine, very much at his ease, began a pains-taking recital, from dinner-time on until the discovery of the second body. Gaunt remained motionless, his hand shading his eyes, and he seemed to be half asleep. When the brandy came, he moved that right hand only to carry a glass of the spirit to his lips. But, Tairlaine observed as the story progressed, the fingers of the left hand began slowly to twitch.

"Of course," Tairlaine went on, "we can get you notes of the testimony; Inspector Tape will probably——"

"Thank you," said Gaunt dully. "I think I shall remember."

A long silence. The plashing of the waterfall grew louder, but so accustomed was Tairlaine to it by this time that he scarcely noticed.

Without speaking, Sir George handed over his plan. Gaunt took out a long thin pipe, which he filled and lighted. The plan lay on his knee. Gaunt pinched the bridge of his nose, the blue smoke-wreaths curling up over his head.

At last he spoke.

"To begin with, Doctor, who knew about those doors being nailed up, besides the man Saunders?"

"So far as I know, nobody."

"Did anybody see the hammer and nails Lord Rayle was

carrying, besides you two, Mr. Francis Steyne, and Mr. Massey?"

"I don't think so. He was eager to conceal them after Mr. Steyne had called attention to them, as I told you."

Gaunt nodded. "This is, of course, no 'stunt' murder, Doctor. The murderer obviously did not want us to have an impossible situation on our hands. He wanted us to believe that the murderer entered and left by the nailed door behind the tapestry. But he gave no thought to the door; he never suspected it might be nailed up; in consequence, he did not approach his victim from *that* direction. . . ."

Gaunt opened his dull eyes. "I presume we shall be able to demonstrate, by medical evidence, that Miss Steyne could not have strangled her father?"

"I believe so. She is very frail."

"And I, Doctor, hope the possibility does not occur too strongly to Inspector Tape. I hold no brief for Miss Steyne. But there are other explanations." The smoke curled about his head. When he lifted his glass again, he drank nearly half a tumbler of brandy. "You have a remarkable gift for remembering detail, Doctor," he continued vacantly. "For instance—this *click* you heard intrigues me. The important point is this: when did you hear it? The clicking noise inside the armour hall?"

Tairlaine lifted his shoulders. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gaunt. That's precisely what I can't remember. It was some time while Lord Rayle was inside the armour hall, either before or after his murder."

"But, confound it, man!——" Momentarily the dullness fell from Gaunt's eyes; a flash showed, like fire-doors opened, and then he relaxed and continued to curl up smoke-wreaths. "Just so," he said. "Can you account for it in any way?"

"I have been trying to. It might have been . . ."

"Pray excuse my temper, my dear doctor. I think it is fairly clear when it occurred, but there are confusing elements. It might have been—for instance?"

"The light-switch? That was what put me in mind of it."

"The door, I think you told me, was closed." Gaunt glanced down at it. "No such noise, however sharp, could be heard through so thick a door."

"Or," Tairlaine muttered thoughtfully, "it might have been Lord Rayle switching on the lights—the large lights—just as he went in, and just an instant before he slammed the big door. It's quite a logical action. The murderer could have turned them out later."

Gaunt shook his head. "They are very bright, I think you said? And this room was dark except for the firelight and a few very dim candles on this mantelshelf. In other words, it must have been quite dark by the door. You would have seen those lights go on had he turned the switch before the closing of the door . . . would you not?"

"Yes. I am positive."

"Let us see. George, will you oblige?—Go down there, hurry into the room, switch on the lights, and instantly slam the door."

Gaunt had closed his eyes as Sir George complied. The hollow slam of the door boomed down the big library. Gaunt said: "Well, Doctor?"

"I saw them distinctly."

"Quite so. Have you any other explanation?"

Tairlaine hesitated. "It occurred to me as possibly being fanciful . . ."

"My dear sir, I have always encouraged that faculty. The Commissioner does not. Pray go on."

"It has been suggested that the murderer, in strangling Lord Rayle, wore gauntlets, as we presume he did when he killed the maid. Such a pair are heavy. If the steel-finger points struck the floor—if the murderer dropped one of them, in other words——?"

Gaunt stared deep into his pipe. The dark eyebrows were a trifle raised, and the cheek-bones made hollows of shadow on the pale face beneath.

"The noise, Doctor, could not possibly have been made near the pedestal of the statue where Lord Rayle was strangled. It could not possibly have been made in the latter half of the room—the side towards the nailed door—at all."

"Why not?"

"The waterfall, Doctor! You forget the waterfall. If you have quoted Miss Patricia Steyne correctly, she remarked that, once one has passed the middle of the hall towards the

rear, the noise of the waterfall is so loud that not even fairly strong and distinct noises can be heard. She noted it. . . . Whereas, out here, *you* not only heard the voices speaking, but you also heard the squeak of Lord Rayle's shoes approaching that door. Which leads . . ."

Sir George rubbed his forehead uneasily. He said:

"I say, Gaunt, there's one thing. You must have rather a fair idea of why Miss Steyne was waiting behind that stove—you see?"

Gaunt inclined his head. "I shall not mention it, George," he answered solemnly. "I think I may even find a way to divert Inspector Tape, if he becomes too imaginative. In the meantime . . ."

He paused, and sat back again into deep shadow. The red of his pipe was filmed. Only in the depths of the dark red brandy bottle did the fire make gleams.

Quite a procession of people thronged in at the library door. First Inspector Tape, exceedingly military and scowling, sharpening his moustache; then Dr. Manning with his black medicine-case; Francis behind him, and Kestevan, Massey, and Wood.

CHAPTER IX

THE GAUNTLETS ARE FOUND

THEY went slowly into the armour hall after the enormous figure of Inspector Tape: Tairlaine, Francis, and John Gaunt. Gaunt had not spoken since the entrance of the others; he appeared to be communing with his pipe.

Even the inspector, not an imaginative man, was oppressed by the solemn terror of the steel figures. His uniform looked dull against the weight of helmets and scarlet. Sharpening the points of his moustache, he peered about.

"Rum!" he said, exactly as though he were calling for a drink. "Rum!" His voice boomed back in such startling echoes that he lowered it almost to a whisper. The goggling eyes wheeled on Gaunt. "Eh, sir?"

Gaunt nodded. As Tairlaine glanced back, he saw that

Dr. Manning was looking in at the door, and the inspector beckoned him in.

"And there's 'is lordship," Inspector Tape stated. "Pore man. That he was, gentlemen. Well." Approaching, he squinted at the body and began to make notes. "Now I won't deny to you, gentlemen," he continued, still writing, "that Sir George Anstruther has been telling me a very odd story, if you follow me. We'll have it straight later." Deep furrows in the inspector's face, from mouth to nostril, indicated polite mirth, and the goggling eyes twinkled. "A mistake, gentlemen, of course. . . . If you please, Doctor, how long 'as he been dead?"

Dr. Manning examined his watch. "A matter of two hours now, I should say. He died—let us say, between nine-thirty . . . was that the time you saw him come in here, Dr. Tairlaine?"

"Roughly. A trifle later, I should think. Yes. I remember the clock striking. He went in about nine thirty-five or a bit afterwards."

"Quite," said the doctor. "Put it between nine thirty-five and nine forty-five. He hadn't been dead long when I saw him first."

Inspector Tape jotted it down. "Now, gentlemen, if you'll just give me a hand to turn him over. . . . Ah, thanks. I don't need it. A proper light-weight, I should fancy."

Instinctively Tairlaine moved his eyes away as Inspector Tape bent over, but he moved them back again. The big blue-clad figure towered over the diminutive one. Rigor mortis had set in, and Lord Rayle had his legs set in the air horribly as though he were lying there to balance a barrel on his feet in some stage-act. They could see the whites of his eyes; the fallen jaw was plastered with bluish hardness. Tairlaine heard Francis suck in breath in a shudder, and Tairlaine himself felt a trifle sick.

"Ahem," said the inspector, whose red-brown face looked not easy on its own account. Then Tape pulled himself together, and squinted. "A very queer position, gentlemen, that. As though 'e'd been caught from behind taking those squatting-rising exercises. Swedish drill, we called it in the army." He seemed pleased with this imaginative flight,

cleared his throat, and tested one point of his moustache for sharpness with a tentative finger. "Wait a bit, though! Looks as though there'd been a fight. . . . Yes. There *has* been a fight. Bone button ripped off 'is robe. Robe torn midway down. Watch-chain dangling, stud out of 'is shirt, and shirt soiled. Yes—and there's a wallet lying beside him. Empty. . Hands soiled too, and a scratch there."

Francis pushed forward to look. He frowned at Manning.

"I say, Doctor. Didn't you tell us he'd been caught from behind and strangled without any fuss?"

"My dear boy!" protested the doctor, in a distressed voice. "You are certainly overwrought. I said nothing of the kind. We all assumed it, yes; I said that it would have required little pressure to kill him. But for the rest of it—no, no!"

Inspector Tape had produced a flashlight. He was kneeling beside the body, using the flashlight and revealing rather horrible glimpses at close range.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to Francis. "It is queer. A very odd position, that is. And there are at least three knots in the cord at the back of his neck. . . . A bowstring, I think somebody said. Sir George, to be exact. From the case over there. What do *you* make of it, sir?"

Patently the inspector was growing more and more nervous, as his continual throat-clearings attested. He appeared to consider the bowstring as almost an affront, and he cocked his head slowly towards Gaunt. The latter was standing motionless, puffing slowly at his pipe. Gaunt always seemed to be standing in somebody's shadow; he emerged now from behind the portly shadow of Dr. Manning. Setting down his brandy glass on the floor, he took the flashlight from Tape's hand.

Nobody spoke.

Kneeling down, Gaunt polished his eyeglass on a handkerchief. As Tairlaine looked over his shoulder, he saw that it was not an eyeglass, but a lens as strong as a jeweller's. The silverish hair gleamed. There was silence beneath the subdued roar of the waterfall as Gaunt went over the body. But he did not take long: chiefly he examined the eyes and nose, and tried to insert his finger under the swollen flesh about the cord.

"Tell me, Doctor," he said, staring at the body with the glass still screwed into his eyes. "Dr.—Manning, isn't it? Thank you. It is plain, of course, that he was in a very weak condition. Could a fairly light pressure on his neck, by means of fingers, have killed him?"

"I have said so," the doctor answered, rather testily, "several times, my dear sir. Even the shock to his heart might have been enough. If there was a fight, that exertion in itself might have done for him."

"Quite," said Gaunt thoughtfully. He rocked on his heels. "Inspector, I think you ought to know that this man was dead before the bowstring was tightened round his neck."

The inspector stared at him, and then fumbled automatically for his notebook.

Gaunt's face had assumed a strange, grey, pinched expression as he rose. He reached for his brandy glass as automatically as the inspector for his notebook. The pipe had gone out between his teeth, and he spoke without removing it, in rather jerky sentences.

"You will see it, of course, Doctor, on closer examination. There is no blood either in his nostrils or his eyes. Yet the face is slightly cyanosed. And the cord is embedded so deeply in his neck that there must certainly have been blood in both the eyes and nostrils if he had been actually strangled with it. . . . Er—if someone has a match? I thank you, sir.—It was wound there within a minute or so of his death. But it didn't kill him. If you will use my glass, Inspector—thank you—you must see some very faint abrasions on the neck. Nothing definite, of course. Fingers. Or, as Sir George has already suggested to me in this case, gauntlets."

He drained the glass.

"But why?" Francis demanded, as Gaunt aimlessly switched the flashlight off and on. "I mean to say, why the bowstring, then? And if there was a fight, why is he in that funny position? It isn't natural, you know. It's as though the murderer had lifted him in the air as though he were being hanged, and held him there till he was dead, and then let him down to fall on his feet. I mean——"

He hesitated, uncertain.

"Well, sir?" demanded the inspector. Gaunt had begun to pace about the floor. With his high cheek-bones and his cavalier tuft of whisker, he seemed entirely at home among the armoured figures.

"I think there was a fight," he said, "only in a manner of speaking. That robe, you will observe, reaches to his heels. If there had been a fight, there would have been a great deal of thrashing about. And where the robe would have been marked or torn would have been at the bottom, along the edges, because both he and his adversary would have stepped on it. It is not torn there, you see. . . . The torn places occur in the front and—a much larger one—at the joining of the neck and the cowl. The latter is significant. That is not precisely the memento of a fight. Lord Rayle was trying to get *away* from his assailant." Gaunt lit his pipe again. "Allow me, Inspector . . . a little reconstruction. Lord Rayle, let us say, comes unexpectedly on our man while the latter is engaged in some suspicious enterprise. He must have got quite close unobserved; otherwise, Lord Rayle would have run away and set up the alarm. As it is, he gets too close. The murderer reaches out, tears his collar in drawing him back, and then . . ." He made a gesture.

"Well, sir," Inspector Tape interposed; "that's pure guesswork, you know——"

He paused, twisting his moustache vigorously. Gaunt had wandered away, and they heard him wandering among the glass cases as though he had forgotten the whole matter. A moment more they listened to those hollow footfalls pacing in measured echoes under the roof. . . .

"Now, then, gentlemen," continued the inspector sharply, as though to cover up something, "if you don't mind, I think we had better go back to the library. I'll have the constables carry out the body, and I should regard it as a favour, Doctor, if you would make a thorough examination of 'im.—Coming, sir?"

"In a moment," Gaunt answered, from a great distance. "In a moment."

The inspector was worried. This manifested itself in many goggling glances over his shoulder, in louder talk,

almost oratorically, and in the way he deepened his parade-ground voice.

"I'll tell you what it is, sir," he confided to Francis, as they were emerging into the library. "I'm a practical man. No nonsense about me, if you know what I mean; eh?—But I don't like that 'all. Not a bit. Why don't I like it? Well, sir, for a fact, I can't tell you: I just feel it about them suits of armour. I feel things that way sometimes. . . ."

Staring at the soldierly back, Tairlaine had no hesitation in feeling the suggestion of terror which Inspector Tape almost shamefacedly acknowledged. Somebody had piled more wood on the library fire, and white faces were turned towards them in its glow; motionless, like the steel dummies with their shuttered faces: Massey nursing his brief-case, Sir George standing gloomily by the fireplace, Wood at respectful detachment near the door, even Kestevan now sliding polished shoes slowly on the floor. . . .

Well, and what was the subtle menace of the dummies? Not watchfulness, as though there might be eyes behind the closed visors. Those beaked visors carried a horrible suggestion of beaked birds of prey, shut and inhuman; burnished birds, ready to snap. But it ran deeper than that. It was the swagger of the empty cases, Tairlaine thought. They were hollow towers, and at a lunge they would scatter and clash; but there they stood, chests out, elbows crooked like a man ready to assume a fighting stance, and the very posture of their legs belied the fact that there was no fighter inside.

"Well?" demanded Sir George.

"Well, sir," replied the inspector, with heavy thoughtfulness, "I've seen both bodies, and now we can begin. If you don't mind, sir,"—he turned to Tairlaine ponderously, and took out his notebook—"your sworn statement first, if you please."

Tairlaine went through his recital. He spoke almost mechanically, and Inspector Tape broke the point of his pencil.

"Oh, see here, sir," he protested, reddening. . . .

"It's true, right enough," said Francis gloomily. He grew querulous. "For God's sake, man, don't you start

that again ! We've all had our turn at doubting it. I know it couldn't happen, but it did. Carry on, please ! ”

Tape's neck moved higher out of his collar, like a turkey's. He goggled on everybody.

“ But I can't put that down, Mr. Steyne ! ” he said, rapping his knuckles on the notebook. “ I should get—excuse me—most special 'ell from the Chief Constable. See here, sir, a mistake . . . ! ”

“ Are there any more questions ? ” asked Francis. “ Dr. Tairlaine's waiting.”

The inspector turned to Massey. “ You confirm all this, sir ? ”

“ Every bit of it,” the secretary answered. He looked tired, and kept smoothing his stringy hair with a dull motion. “ You'll want my story next, I dare say. Well——”

He recounted how he had left the dinner before the coffee, had gone upstairs, typed the letter, and come downstairs looking for his employer shortly after nine-thirty. When he told of passing Lord Rayle in the armour-hall door, Inspector Tape bent forward.

“ Ah ! . . . He seemed—upset, sir ? ”

“ So far as I could judge, very upset. The light was very dim—there was only that one bulb burning. I hadn't turned on the roof lights when I looked for him in there ; he always forbade it. And then I only saw him for a moment. But he'd certainly had a great shock of some sort.”

“ And what, precisely, did he say to you ? Be careful ! ” warned the inspector.

Massey scowled. “ That's what I've been trying to remember all evening. It was something about ‘ They've got the pearls,’ or ‘ stolen the pearls,’ or something like it. I can't be positive. I was asking him to sign the letter. . . . ”

“ He didn't say 'oo it was ? ”

“ No. I'm sure of that.”

“ And what did he do then ? ”

“ Just shoved me out at the door and slammed it. I didn't see any more.”

The inspector wrote carefully in his notebook and then scratched his forehead with the pencil. “ Now then, sir. No idea why he went into the armour hall ? Didn't say, did 'e ? ”

"No."

"Ah. Just so." More writing, while the inspector grew confidential and heavily diplomatic. "I understand," he went on, "I understand Mr. Tairlaine to say that Miss Patricia Steyne was in the 'all when her father was killed. Eh? Just so. She found the body. Now, then . . ."

Massey exchanged a glance with Francis, and shifted uneasily. The waters were getting deep; clearly they should have arranged on a story beforehand, if Patricia were to be kept out of it.

"*Wot* was she doing there?" demanded the inspector, thrusting out his neck.

Massey turned guileless eyes. "Why, looking at the armour. We—we often do."

The last remark had a forced ease. Tairlaine thought: He's a bad liar, and he'd better be careful. Massey was too intently examining the catch of his brief-case.

"H'm," said the inspector. "In the dark?"

"Oh, it wasn't dark—just very dim. There was one light. I think I told you that his lordship absolutely refused to have any of us touch the lights in there."

"So you did," said the inspector, goggling. He coughed, and frowned. "Still . . . did *you* see her, sir?"

"Well, no. Naturally not. That hall is ninety feet long, and I had difficulty in seeing her father. She was at the other end of it, you know."

"Ah . . . But when you first went in, you looked about the hall, didn't you? You looked about for 'is lordship, didn't you? Did you see 'er?"

"I also told you," Massey replied stolidly, "that I didn't go half-way into the hall. I merely spoke her father's name, and——"

"Just so!" cried the inspector, growing slightly excited. A deeper brick colour was in his face as he stared. "But wouldn't she answer? Wouldn't she come out?"

"Come out?" repeated Massey. "I wasn't calling *her*, you know. But above all, if she were in the rear part of the hall she couldn't have heard me. The waterfall, you know. And if she were . . . well, wandering about among those glass cases, she wouldn't have even seen me."

The inspector stared at him. "We must speak to Miss

Steyne," he said slowly. "Not now, sir"—he waved his hand towards Francis, who was starting to protest—"if you insist. To-morrow. But soon. Did she see her father killed?"

The question was addressed to nobody in particular, and Francis answered.

"Inspector," said Francis, "you're a reasonable man. An imaginative man. I mean to say—aren't you?"

Tape coughed again. "That's as it may be, sir. I may be." He was obviously flattered, and sharpened his moustache. "What I should like to know . . ."

"Did you ever feel the pressure of the world?" Francis asked earnestly. "Didn't you ever wish to withdraw alone and communicate with yourself? Solitude, Inspector. I mean to say—she was thinking. Haven't you ever been impervious to outside noises . . .?"

Tairlaine tried to picture Patricia thinking, and found it difficult. Francis's romantic picture was not at all convincing and the young man was talking somewhat wildly. Then Tairlaine glanced at Kestevan's solid face. Kestevan's expression seemed to say: "What, aren't they going to talk of my love affairs?" and to be hurt about it. However, the actor merely drew out a pocket mirror and examined the wings of his tie.

"That's as it may be, sir," the inspector responded doggedly. "I might like to retire for a bit of a think, as you say. But I'm not so impervious to outside noises that I don't see a fight going on and a murder committed in the same room."

"You heard Mr. Gaunt say there wasn't really a fight. The murderer just grabbed him. If there were any outcry, the waterfall would have covered it."

"Ah," said Tape, cocking his head on one side. "Well." He grew mysterious. "I'm not saying what I think now, sir. Let's go on. Now, then . . . you other gentlemen. Where were you all this time?"

Francis scrutinised him carefully from under heavy eyelids, and then relaxed his long body in the chair.

"Sir George and I had been playing billiards since dinner——" He looked over at the baronet, who nodded. "And then——"

"All the time, sir? You were here——?"

"Tut," said Francis. "I mean to say, let me tell it. To proceed. In the midst of a game, I became thirsty. I required spirituous refreshment. So (a quite natural action) I rang the bell for Wood. But Wood was playing the gramophone in his own quarters, and didn't hear me." He had put the tips of his fingers together, and was inspecting them musingly. Now he glanced at Wood, who inclined his head. Inspector Tape looked still more mysterious, and wrote in his notebook.

"Hence I went to forage for myself. I went next door into the trophy room. On a side-table I found the remnants of a meal. Mrs. Carter—that's the housekeeper, Inspector—later told me it had been laid out for Dr. Manning. Hence I scented whisky. But for a long time I couldn't find it. After much rummaging, I discovered that some ingenious person had hidden it behind one of the gun-racks."

"Eh?" demanded the inspector.

"Excuse me, sir," Wood interposed, taking a step forward. "I think I can explain that. It is an idea of Mrs. Carter's. She believes, with or without reason, that certain of the footmen may be addicted to . . ." He cleared his throat, finishing the sentence.

"Saunders," said Francis, with enlightenment. He looked thoughtful. "Pinches the whisky, does he? That's why I can never find it on sideboards and things. I see. Well, Inspector . . ."

"Please go on, sir."

Francis lifted an eyebrow. "I expect I had a bit of a warm glow already, Inspector. You know how it is. It occurred to me that the whole world might want another little drink. Specifically, I thought of my good friend Dr. Tairlaine, sitting alone in the library and ravening for a spot. So I betrayed Sir George and went to find him. You know the rest."

There was a silence. Tape's long face seemed annoyed. He had gathered a sizable notebook already, and frowned at it.

"And how long were you gone from the billiard-room, sir?"

"Gone from . . . Oh, my God, Inspector," Francis

said wearily. "I suppose you mean, 'What's your alibi'?"

"Well, sir, I only thought——"

"The answer is, I don't know," Francis told him.

"Maybe five minutes, or ten minutes, or less. I can't be certain."

"I didn't mean to suggest anything," Tape said hurriedly.

"It was routine, sir. Routine. You'd be surprised 'ow much of it there is. All I meant was: well, if you went into the billiard-room, you see, you and Sir George must have been in sight of each other—eh?"

There was a slightly malicious smile on Francis's face.

"As a matter of fact, you know, we weren't. There used to be a door between the billiard-room and trophy-room, but my old man had it sealed up. He used to spend a lot of time in the trophy-room, and he hated to hear people playing billiards and talking next door. Just as I hate to see people playing bridge. We're all cracked in some way; the whole family. I should have told you. . . . No, Inspector. We weren't in sight of each other."

"That's right, Inspector," put in Sir George. The heat of the fire had made his face redder, and he seemed puzzled; he seemed to be trying to recall something. Now he glanced up vaguely under his tufted brows. "We weren't together. But don't talk utter nonsense, Frank. Get on with it!"

Francis appeared to be enjoying himself.

"But it might have been a conspiracy, you know. Sir George and I might have been in it together: a fiendish conspiracy. I told you I was a bit cracked. And Sir George has always envied my old man's collection. So——"

"Chuck it, will you?" Sir George demanded, almost angrily. "The inspector has enough on his mind as it is, without your bringing in all that rot."

"By Jove," said Francis vacantly. He did not seem to have heard. "Everything might have been a conspiracy. I'm growing brilliant. Dr. Tairlaine and Bruce might have been in it to murder the old man together and tell us that fantastic story to support each other. Ha. Or else, it might have been Dr. Manning and Ir . . ."

He checked himself, stiffening, and his eyes narrowed. There was a pause. Nobody seemed to know what to say,

and the inspector's glance was roving with sudden interest. Fortunately the gap was covered by Wood's movement at the door; Wood had withdrawn, and they heard a woman's voice talking shrilly beyond. Francis turned rather scared eyes as the butler came back.

"Excuse me, sir," the butler told him evenly. "Mrs. Carter has found the gauntlets. They were in Doris Mundo's room. She refuses to touch them. If you'll excuse me, I can go and fetch them for you."

CHAPTER X

THE OPEN WINDOW

INSPECTOR TAPE went with him, but none of the rest moved.

"In Doris's room," Francis murmured, reaching after cigarettes. "I wonder."

Sir George said sharply: "Look here, Frank. While we've got a breathing spell, let me warn you: go easy. Stop the foolery, or he may begin to take you seriously. He's dangerous, and he'll want a victim. So go easy."

To everybody's surprise, Kestevan spoke.

"That was a fine thing to say," Kestevan exclaimed, twitching his nostrils. "About Lady Rayle. You practically hinted——"

"You're clever, you are," said Francis. He turned to look at Kestevan with refreshed interest, and examined him curiously. "I thought it was about time we heard from the cuckoo-clock. I say, Kestevan, what film are you and Irene going to produce? She admires your art, but don't tell me you have ambitions to play Hamlet. I couldn't bear it."

"Who told you anything about that?" the other demanded. His eyes had narrowed.

"Spies," Francis said darkly. "But what, Kestevan? Some fatal premonition tells me it's going to be terrifically Russian. One of those powerful things without any dialogue, where the author is always solving the problems of the world and getting sent to Siberia for it. For many years," said Francis thoughtfully, "the publishing-houses of

the world have been engaged in a bitter rivalry to see who could print Russian novels in the smallest type. Once down to the accepted microcosm, the author becomes deified. Besides, we English-speaking peoples are convinced that no novel can be any good if you can pronounce the names of its characters the first time you try. Irene is, I know. Yes, Kestevan, I feel it will be Russian. In all likelihood, 'The Contaminated Family,' by Boris Stifv."

Kestevan rose, put his hands on his hips, and strode forward.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said, "but you're insulting Lady Rayle. And since you know so much, you might just as well put it in your pipe and smoke it. That's what we're going to do. Something *good*. . . . Not trash. It'll be in Russian, all right—I suppose you heard that too—but it's from English. Yes, and it's by a relation of yours. A woman. So you'd better be pretty careful what you say, Steyne."

"Eh?" said Francis. "A re——"

"Anyway, she has the same name, so I suppose it is," snapped Kestevan, waving the point aside. "And you'd better not get funny at the expense——"

"Do you by any chance," said Sir George thoughtfully, "mean Gertrude Stein?"

"Yes, I do. And what about it?"

"Oh, my hat," said Francis. "Yes, yes, of course. The powerful young stylist of the family, from Worcestershire."

"Well? Is there anything funny about that?—I'm not sure what it is, but Lady Rayle says I'll be swell in it. So get *that* straight, Steyne, and as for your ordering me out of this house——"

"I don't doubt it," said Francis. "Upon my word I don't doubt it. You will be magnificent, my boy. But your own contribution—I mean to say, what part do you play? The slide-rule, the missing punctuation, or the loquacious plate of gooseberries? And in Russian, too. Good-bye, Hollywood. The thing will be an artistic riot."

He had been speaking with more and more animation, his face flushed and his voice growing louder. Sir George cut in:

"Steady !—I should quieten down, if I were you. Your father's lying in that room, you know."

Francis turned a queer face. "Let me be mad," he begged. "Let me be mad. For a while, anyhow. I'm whistling in a graveyard, and if I don't talk like that I shall go dotty. . . . Besides, he isn't there any longer. Look."

But Francis did not look. He turned away, and tried to strike a match for his cigarette, as a blue-coated constable and the impassive Saunders appeared through the armour-room door, carrying their stiff burden. Dr. Manning superintended them. They were silent and almost ghostly as they disappeared down the corridor. Tairlaine heard Dr. Manning say:

"In the music-room, if you please."

"*Sic transit*," said Francis, lighting the cigarette unsteadily. And then he added in a lower voice: "God rest his mad old soul, he had his good points. And now what? There's Mr. Gaunt, by the way."

Dusting his hands on a handkerchief, Gaunt came into the library.

"Well?" inquired Sir George. "Find anything?"

The other went over to fill his glass with brandy before replying. Some colour had come under the grey shadows of his cheek-bones, and his dull eyes were brighter.

"I shouldn't undertake to say," he answered slowly. "But that plan you drew, George, was most helpful. Incidentally, I overheard the latter part of your talk. So the gauntlets are found?"

"Yes."

"And in the maid's bedroom," said Gaunt. "Yes. I see. By the way, Mr. Steyne, you made a very interesting remark while you were looking at the position of the body. . . ."

"Instructive, I take it?" said Francis.

For a moment the other did not answer. His eyes unobtrusively roved round the group, as though he were considering and discarding eventualities. Finally they fixed on Kestevan. The latter, palely glowering, had come close to the fire, his back towards Gaunt. . . .

"You said," Gaunt resumed, "that he looked as though somebody, in strangling him, had lifted him off the ground

and held him up while the murder was being done. I am inclined to believe that there was some truth in the remark. But with this difference. For instance . . .”

Suddenly his hands shot out. The thin, strong fingers closed about Kestevan's neck, and Kestevan was lifted into the air like a toy as Gaunt whirled him round to face them.

An almost inhuman neigh and squeal bubbled between the actor's lips. Francis jumped to his feet, and Sir George cried out in alarm.

“Observe his legs,” said Gaunt.

As gently as though he were holding a piece of bric-à-brac, he lowered the actor to his feet. Kestevan almost staggered; his face was mottled, he seized at his rumpled collar, and he held tightly to a chair. But they had seen it: they had seen the little man with the pale face and the polished hair held in that horrible tableau. One leg had been thrust straight out, the other drawn up towards his abdomen, the feet pointing straight out, the arms jerked backwards. . . .

Kestevan croaked: “Oh—my Christ, what—you . . . !” He gasped again. “You've torn my collar. You've rumpled me all up. . . .”

“I must extend to you my profoundest apologies, sir,” said Gaunt. He was not quite drunk, and certainly not in the least ruffled. “Pray excuse me. I wanted a small man. Mr. Massey is the right height, but, I fear, much too heavy for my experiment. And I had to take you unaware.”

“The subject of the experiment,” said Francis, “is satisfied. Gad, you gave me a turn. But what does it show?”

“A man who is being strangled, from either the back or the front, acts—as you have seen Mr.—excuse me——?”

“Kestevan,” said Francis.

“As Mr. Kestevan acted. His knees are drawn up, close together, and he kicks, either forward or backwards, towards his assailant. The excellent probability is, therefore, that he will be carried *backwards*, to lie supine. It is an instinctive movement on the part of one with his hand about another's throat. After death, of course, the victim will go limp.”

“You noticed the missing shirt-stud. It is almost incon-

ceivable to imagine somebody, in a fight, seizing at so tiny a thing as a stud to wrench it out. You will only with difficulty be able to seize your own studs, standing here quietly, if you try it. It popped out, I fancy. It popped out—just as the watch-chain popped out of his pocket—when Lord Rayle was bent backwards while he threw out his chest and struggled forwards, as Mr. Kestevan did.

“You ask me to what this leads. Let us say that Lord Rayle, after death, is lying limp on his back. Now, there was a bone button missing from his robe, as Inspector Tape very sagaciously observed. The button-hole also was torn considerably, but in a very curious direction. . . . Do you recall which direction?”

“Which direction?” Francis repeated stupidly. “Good Lord, not. I didn’t see it at all. What do you mean, ‘which direction’?”

“It was torn upwards,” said Gaunt. “I don’t care to try any more experiments, but . . .” He turned towards Kestevan, who snapped something and backed away . . . “but suppose I were struggling with Mr. Kestevan. He wears a loose robe buttoned up the front. I might seize it in the fight, and tear it at the breast-button—as Lord Rayle’s was torn. But if I seized that robe, it would inevitably be from *above*, and rip downwards. I should not catch hold under the button, as though I were trying to sweep the robe off his head.”

“Then——?” prompted Francis.

Gaunt sampled his brandy. “And this tear was from beneath. It did not occur in any fight. In point of fact, gentlemen, our fight begins to look very small and one-sided indeed. . . . However, if Lord Rayle were lying dead on his back, and there were something underneath the buttoned robe I wished to have . . . his keys, say, or his wallet . . . and I were hurrying, frantically——?”

Francis nodded, his eyes fixed. “You’d grab the robe underneath, and tear upwards to get it open, and rip off the button. Upwards, yes. Like a man opening a box of sardines.”

Sir George said mildly: “As a comparison, Frank, when speaking of your father, the question of a box of sar——”

"No!" Francis snapped. "I see. I see. I want to hear this. Please carry on, Mr. Gaunt."

"We have him, then, lying on his back while the murderer rifles his pockets. However he fell, his limbs certainly weren't in that weird position we found them in later; they would have interfered with the murderer's efforts. . . . We must assume that, after death, the murderer at comparative leisure wound the bowstring about his neck. *And then what?* We can understand why the murderer turned him over on his face; it was necessary, to tie those three knots in the cord. But——"

Gaunt leaned forward. He was standing with his back to the fire now, his angular face in shadow; Tairlaine sensed a groping, a fierce tensiety there as he pointed the brandy-glass at them.

"——but *why* did the killer place a limp body in that extraordinary position? There, gentlemen, is one of three major problems. Not only was such a position unnecessary, but to place a limp figure in that fashion, like a stuffed doll, would have taken considerable time. And time, we know, the murderer did not have. If I have understood correctly, between the time Lord Rayle entered the room and the time his daughter discovered the body, not more than eight minutes—at the outside—had elapsed. He had in some fashion to make his escape. Why did he waste all that time?"

Francis ground out his cigarette. "This is getting worse," he said. "You don't seem to be answering anything, Mr. Gaunt. You just seem to be substituting several riddles for one.—Three major problems. H'm. The first, I dare say, is why our murderer wound the bowstring about his neck after he was dead. The second you've just indicated. What is the third?"

"The stud and the button were missing," said Gaunt, "and they had to be somewhere. I found them. And that's the curious thing. Do you know where I found them?"

"On the floor, I suppose."

Slowly Gaunt shook his head. "No. Not on the floor. *In Lord Rayle's pocket.*"

The ~~his~~ popped and crackled. Sir George ruffled his

scanty tonsure of hair, looking like a bewildered Pickwick. "Good God," he said flatly. "The murderer not only props up the body like that, but he searches about on the floor for the stud and button, and carefully puts them into the pocket of . . . I say, John ! This is impossible, you know."

"There they are," said Gaunt, holding out the articles in his palm. He juggled them a moment. "You see, I'm not sure that all this is so difficult of explanation as you seem to think. By God !" he said suddenly. "I wish the Commissioner were here. I wish Blanchard were here, with his little machines. Excuse me, gentlemen. I only meant that there are several rather startling deductions to be drawn from these facts. For example . . ."

His eyes, which were brightening under the black brows, became dull again, and his fingers fell to his side. He sat down motionless in a chair by the fireside as Inspector Tape entered.

"Ah," said that official. He was carrying a pair of polished steel gauntlets, their ribbed fingers crooked. The others crowded round him as he held them up in the firelight.

Tairlaine inspected them carefully. They were of late Gothic design, as Sir George had indicated, linked at the finger-joints with finely-turned phalangeal defences, and with the fingers tapering to sharp points. The wrist-plate was embellished in rotted scarlet cloth, bearing arms stamped in what had once been gold. The cuff, cut with an elaborate design, would stretch more than half to the wearer's elbow, and come up to a point round the forearm.

The dusky steel winked in the firelight as they swung from the inspector's hand. . . .

"Look here, gentlemen," the latter observed suddenly. "There's one thing I can't get straight for the life of me. It's most odd, that is. I'd always thought that them people in the Middle Ages, or whatever it was, were giants. That's how you think of them. Big men ; as tall as—well, as myself, all of them."

He blinked.

"Well, gentlemen, them suits of armour—why, they're

for little men, and not very thick-set, either. And that armour looks 'eavy."

Sir George took one of the gauntlets and turned it over. "Quiet right, Inspector," he agreed. "The full tilting-armour generally weighed eighty-five pounds, more or less. Fighting armour a trifle less, and foot soldiers had fairly light accoutrements. But we should be hard put to it even to stand up in them nowadays. . . . They *were* small men. They had no surplus flesh; it was boiled off them by those plates. But why do you mention it?"

"Couldn't have been a very large hand in them gauntlets," nodded the inspector dubiously. "I tried it meself, and me 'and wouldn't go in at all. I thought—no offence—if you gentlemen didn't mind . . . ?"

"Righto," Francis said instantly. "I'll try it on. Give it me."

His hand, though rather long, was thin, and the gauntlet fitted, though imperfectly. He held up the hand in the firelight, turning it about curiously.

"I say . . . the joints move easily," he commented, clenching his right hand slowly. "With practice, I could pick things up with this. It's easier than a glove; like handling chopsticks. And—yes, it's been oiled. Quite recently, too. Try it yourself, you chaps."

There was something ghastly about the shining joints clenching and moving before the young man's face; Tairlaine could hardly keep down a shudder. Massey accepted them gingerly from Francis, and swallowed a few times before he went on with stolid thoroughness to pull on both gauntlets. Next came Sir George, for whom they were so tight a fit that he could not get them on. Tairlaine they fitted easily. His skin crawled as he felt the rotted insides caressing his fingers, and he hurried in stripping them off again. As he handed them to Kestevan, that celebrated portrayer of gangster roles drew back. . . .

"Well?" said Francis. "What's the matter? Put them on."

Kestevan's hand went instinctively to his rumpled collar. He glared at Francis, and then made a swaggering gesture at trying to put on the gauntlets as though he had been doing it all his life.

"There," he snapped, holding them out. "Anything else?"

It was curious, Tairlaine thought; a brief picture by the fire. Where on the others those gauntlets had been mere ugly incongruities, they lent an almost feline grace to Kestevan. They were *right*; they fitted not only actually, but artistically, and lent a blaze of medieval splendour to the actor's pale, dark-haired good looks. Kestevan sensed it too. He had been eager to get them off, but he had unconsciously adopted a pose. And Tairlaine thought: however he might play a favourite Russian hero of Lady Rayle, he would make an admirable Cesare Borgia. You saw the sulky, pampered little man only after those red-bound steel terrors were off his hands. . . .

"The others——?" Inspector Tape glanced round, and nodded heavily. "Later, later. Now, then . . ."

Smoke-wreaths were curling over Gaunt's head as Gaunt sat with his hand shading his eyes. He said:

"Where did you find them, Inspector?"

"Ah. As to that, sir. In the girl's room, as you may have heard."

"Where?"

"Wh—well, sir, if you've not been upstairs——?"

"I have a plan of the house, thanks to Sir George. Where were they?"

"By the side of the poor girl's bed, sir. Lying there. As though they'd been pushed off the bed. Mrs. Carter found them; just put 'er 'ead in, sir, and turned on the lights, and there they were."

"Anybody else in the room?"

"No, sir. Ordinarily there's a girl named Annie Morrison, who slept in the same room, but to-night . . ." The inspector hesitated again, and coughed. "Well, for one reason or another, Mrs. Carter had made Annie Morrison sleep in another room with two other 'ousemaids. Doris was alone there from about eight-thirty, on to the time—you see?"

Francis had absently picked up the gauntlets again, and was fingering them. He asked:

"Did you question the other maids? I mean, did any of them hear or see anything during the evening?"

"I haven't done it yet, sir. But Mrs. Carter has. They didn't 'ear or see anything at all, though they were awake. Talking, like. About Doris, I fancy. But none of them went into 'er room. They'd been forbidden."

"Oh, yes," Francis said bitterly. "The contamination, of course. Excuse me. Carry on, Mr. Gaunt."

Gaunt lifted his eyes from frowning at the plan. "There were a few things, Inspector," he said musingly, "I shall have a look at the room, of course; but something struck my fancy. . . . Was the room disarranged at all?"

"No, sir. She'd been lying down on the bed at one time, because you could see the impression; but she 'adn't even taken down the counterpane. What sticks me—well, it's this. Why were them gauntlets in *her* room?"

Gaunt tapped down the ashes in his pipe. "With my plan, Inspector, I think I have a clearer idea of the castle than you have, even though you've been upstairs. Now, about this girl's room: there is a window in it, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir."

"And when you went upstairs it was open, wasn't it?"

Inspector Tape stared, and then reached after his notebook. "It was. Yes. And that window overlooks the open runway where the body was found. You mean, sir, that she was strangled and dropped out into the passage?"

"Precisely."

"But look here!" Francis burst out. "That's only a few steps from Wood's door, and Mrs. Carter's. You couldn't drop a body down there—I mean, smack! a fifteen or twenty-foot drop—without somebody hearing it."

"I think you could, Mr. Steyne," said Gaunt placidly. "If I remember correctly, there was a particularly large gramophone playing particularly noisy hymns at just about the time she was murdered."

Inspector Tape bit at the end of his pencil.

"Well, but—it doesn't make sense, you see. Why? Why should the murderer strangle her and take the risk of being caught by dropping her body down into the passage?"

Somebody might easily have seen or heard him, mightn't they? Why not just leave her there? He left the gauntlets, so he didn't want to 'ide 'is presence in the room. So——?"

"Exactly, Inspector," said Gaunt. "Why? He is a very strange person, our murderer. But I am interfering with you, I see. Pray go on with your questioning."

CHAPTER XI

THE GHOST IN ARMOUR

It was Francis who outlined the remainder of the story, from their discovery of Doris Mundo's body up until the arrival of Inspector Tape. The latter was worried, and frankly incredulous. But his mind fastened on monetary details.

"Ten thousand in bearer-bonds . . ." A twirl to the red moustache, a solemn furrow in his forehead. "That's very bad, gentlemen. If we had the numbers——"

"I have them here, as it happens," said Massey, opening his brief-case. He rummaged through some papers, and presently handed the inspector a slip of paper. "But about the money in the cash-box, there's no record."

"No idea of how much it was, sir?"

"Several hundred pounds, at the very lowest estimate. It was rent-money."

"Ten thou——" The inspector growled, rumbled, and shook his head like a burrowing dog. "Never mind. But why did he keep so much cash on 'and, do you know?"

"Antiquarian purchases. He always paid cash. In the first place, he hated writing cheques, because it was so much bother and his stubs never tallied; so he decided that every time he wrote a cheque the bank tried to rob him."

"H'm. Yes. Now, that was a very odd letter—that letter about Dr. Manning. Eh? Meaning no offence. . . ."

Tape lifted his heavy red eyebrows and leered confidentially.

"No, it wasn't," said Francis in a tired voice. "I happen to know that he'd sliced *me* out of his will as much as he legally could, at first. Then he put me back in again. At the moment I don't know whether I'm out or in." There was a pause, after which Francis put down the gauntlets on a side-table and added: "And I don't particularly care."

"Still and all, I must have a bit of a talk with Dr. Manning. Matter o' form, you see. However . . . Excuse me, sir. I gather Lady Rayle is the real beneficiary?"

"I dare say. The future of the cinema depends on it."

"The—— I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," said Francis. "I'm going to get a drink. Talk to somebody else."

He rambled across the room rather sullenly, and Inspector Tape stared after him for a time before he turned back with a warning pencil lifted.

"Now, gentlemen," he went on with persuasive briskness, "I know it's growing late, and there's nothing that can't be done just as well to-morrow, and me wife worries when I'm out late. Not," he corrected himself, drawing down the corners of his mouth, "that it would keep a member of the force from duty, but—well, we can't question the ladies to-night, can we? Eh? No. So if you, sir,"—he pointed suddenly at Kestevan, who jumped—"if you'll just let me 'ave your account of the evening—eh?"

Kestevan dusted the arms of his coat. He glanced uncertainly at the others, and saw the warning eyes of Sir George and Massey fixed on him. But he was more at ease with Francis out of the room.

"Well, I don't know anything, officer," he said. "Not a thing."

"Howsoever," said the inspector, "tell me 'ow you spent the evening, if you please."

"Why, I—well, I went upstairs directly after dinner," said Kestevan, his uneasy eyes moving up full at Sir George, and speaking in a somewhat somnambulistic voice. "I was writing in my room all the time. To my aunt Margaret. I

can show you the letter," he added defiantly, "if you don't believe it. The first I knew was when that footman came up and told me what had happened. Then I got dressed and came downstairs. That's all I know."

"You didn't leave your room at any time?"

Kestevan was opening his mouth for an unwary negative when Sir George interposed: "Oh, that must have been the time you saw Doris. Wasn't it, Mr. Kestevan?"

"Yes," said the other, after a pause. His patent-leather eyes slid between Sir George and the inspector, wondering. But apparently he saw nothing of a trap in the question. "I—er—yes. I saw her. She was going into Lady Rayle's room. I told you that."

The wrinkle deepened in the inspector's forehead. He moved over heavily to glance at the plan of the house which was lying on the arm of Gaunt's chair.

"H'm. Yes—Lady Rayle's room. But your own room is on the other side of the 'ouse, you know. Completely. 'Ow did you happen to see that?"

"Why . . . I was going over to call on Lady Rayle, for a moment," Kestevan answered, in mild astonishment. "I often dropped in. We talked about—about books, and things."

"Tut!" murmured the inspector, clucking his tongue. His expression was disapproving, and he goggled very widely. "Are you in the 'abit, sir, of calling upon married ladies in their boodors? And at night?"

Kestevan looked distressed. "I—well, I—oh, what the hell!" he said. It was the first flash of the human that had appeared under his patent-leather. Even in a rage he had seemed only a stiff creation of the theatre. He turned out soft, expostulating palms, and shrugged.

"And *did* you go in?"

"No. I saw the maid going in, so I didn't," Kestevan explained naïvely. "I went back to my room."

"Ah!" grunted the inspector, very ponderously. As he fingered his chin his whole body seemed to be cocked sideways, a blue giant blinking down at the actor. "I see. You didn't. Well, *that's* none of my affair. What time did you see this?"

"Oh, good Lord! How should I know? Everybody

keeps asking me that, and how should I know? Some time around nine-thirty."

Tape made another cryptic notation. "So you went straight back to your room, I take it?"

"Yes. Listen — don't you believe it? I swear — I did!"

"Just so," agreed the inspector, wrinkling his large nose. The German clock in the corner rolled up its beaming moon-face and good-humouredly began to strike midnight. "A word with Dr. Manning," continued Tape, "and a bit of a look upstairs. . . . Then I think I shall 'ave finished for the night."

When he had gone, Sir George hoisted himself up from a chair. He was worried, and he began to pace back and forth in front of the fire.

"This," he said, "begins to look worse and worse. Let's be frank about it. Theoretically, it's possible for these crimes to have been committed by a burglar, or any sort of outsider. But we know they weren't. Burglars don't steal gauntlets from a house one day and come back the next day to strangle people with them. This is what they call an inside job. And—let's face it—one of *us* is guilty."

Gaunt bent over to knock the ashes out of his pipe. "By the way, George," he said suddenly, "just when were the gauntlets and the bowstring stolen?"

Sir George hesitated, and glanced at Massey.

"It's almost impossible to say," the latter replied. "Sometimes he went into the armour hall every day, and sometimes not for days on end. He discovered the loss of both of them. The bowstring first . . . that was two or three days ago. And the gauntlets just this afternoon; that was why he was raising the devil with me. When anything happened, *I* was to blame. But it doesn't necessarily mean they were stolen at different times. He mightn't have looked at the gauntlet-case. They might both have been missing for some time."

"It's that point," said Sir George, "which makes me wonder . . . but stop a bit. Let's get it in order first." He massaged his eyes with a heavy hand, and then made a vague gesture as though he were trying to imprison something intangible. "To begin with, any of us—*any of us*—could have

killed Henry . . . Lord Rayle. There's an amazing lack of alibis for that very critical ten or fifteen minutes just after nine-thirty. I was alone in the billiard-room. It's very damned unlikely that I could have crept—if you can fancy me creeping—into the armour room, unseen by Bruce or Dr. Tairlaine, and killed him. But still, I was alone in the billiard-room. Agreed?"

"Oh, look here!" Tairlaine protested uneasily.

"The same applies to Francis. He's unlikely, but, still, he was barging about somewhere after whisky. In fact, we're both pretty impossible as suspects. But we have no alibis.

"Mr. Kestevan here was alone in his room, writing or wandering about the halls. Another alibi wanting.

"Lady Rayle and Dr. Manning, then. They would have been in a position to corroborate each other, if, at just about that dangerous time, Manning hadn't wondered whether he'd left the engine of his car running and gone down to see about it. Ditto marks.

"People like Wood and Mrs. Carter are also in need of support. Wood, for instance, doesn't hear his bell ring when Francis tries to summon him. The noise of that gramophone is deafening—but still, he didn't answer the bell. If you wanted to go farther (mind, I'm merely being fanciful!), you could definitely assert that such a gramophone playing in a man's room doesn't mean the man is there. That thing is electrical and automatic, and it plays twelve records without necessitating a change.

"Patricia is in the most dangerous position of all. She was actually *in* the room while the murder was being committed. And, whatever we think of it, we shall have to admit that her story is damaging in the inspector's eyes.

"Finally, the only two people who were together—Dr. Tairlaine and Bruce—are in nearly as bad a position as Patricia. Francis put it correctly: collusion. They tell us that something occurred which we know to be impossible. Now, suppose that for some reason you two had murdered Lord Rayle. You might have sworn nobody came in that door—you might have sworn anything—because you wanted us to believe the murderer entered by the donjon-door

behind the tapestry. Only, you didn't know the door was nailed up. And your efforts to divert suspicion made you tell us an impossible thing."

A chill and rather prickly feeling began to stir at the base of Tairlaine's spine. He shifted, and started to say, "That's fantastic, of course — you know perfectly well——"

"No, I don't know it," Sir George said sharply. "I think such an explanation is fantastic. But I don't *know* it. Any more than I know that the other stories are true. That's my point, you see."

There was a silence. Gaunt sat in shadow, with his eyes closed and his hand clasped round an empty glass; his breathing was so regular that Tairlaine abruptly wondered if he were in a drunken sleep. Massey went over and kicked the burning logs; then he shivered. They all watched each other with a gaze grown suddenly suspicious and almost hostile. . . .

"Steady!" Sir George cautioned. "None of us ought to take umbrage, you know. We shall have to be sporting about it—if only in sheer self-defence. Because we should be suspicious of anybody who too loudly cries his innocence."

"Do you mean *me*?" Kestevan demanded in a shrill voice.

"I don't mean anybody," the other answered gently. "Now let's consider the rest of it. . . ." He paused as Francis came back into the room. The young man's long face was flushed, and a light burned beneath his eyeballs. He had had more than a drink; he seemed to be sullenly gay, and there was a twisted grin under his small fair moustache.

Francis said: "Shake not thy gory locks at me, friend. I say—this looks serious. I don't like your expressions." He stopped in the middle of the room, his eyes narrowing. "Well?"

Sir George mopped his moist red forehead. "I'm afraid I've put my foot in it, Frank. I was suggesting that nobody had an alibi at the time your father was killed. Thence—where were all of us at the time Doris died?"

"Oho," said Francis. He came over to the fire and spread out his hands. "To begin with, when *did* Doris die? I'll be damned if I can remember."

Another silence. Tairlaine found himself baffled; there was only a flood of incoherent pictures in his brain. Faces, the glow of lamps, the great gramophone roaring a hymn, and Wood carrying a red blanket to cover the body.

"I don't remember either," he found himself saying. "We were excited. And I doubt whether anybody noticed. . . . The doctor said she'd been dead ten minutes or so when we went out to look; that's all."

"Let's see." Francis opened and shut his hands before the blaze. "We carried Pat into the drawing-room—we looked at the body—we came out and questioned Pat—Bruce took her upstairs—we talked: you, Sir George, and Dr. Tairlaine and myself. Then I went out to look for Kestevan . . . wait a bit. Do we know definitely how long she'd been dead? I mean to say, can a doctor actually tell about so short a time?"

Sir George kicked at the rug. "Personally, I doubt it. Also personally, I question whether that man Manning isn't a devil of an outstanding *poseur*. I think he was merely being pompous. . . . But let's assume it was correct, anyhow."

"Then you've got me," said Francis. "I went out to look for Kestevan, yes. But I assure you the little gentleman didn't worry me unduly. What I wanted to do, really, was to go somewhere in the dark and let go to a good case of nerves." He bit the words defiantly. "It was dark in the dining-room. I sat on a chair and shivered. I could hear Wood's gramophone. The dashed thing was playing 'Lead, Kindly Light.'" He ruffled his hair, and tried to smile lazily at them. "I mean to say—I'm afraid there was moisture in the old Steyne eyes. Bah. I felt as though I were watching a cheap film. Then I said, 'Look here, my boy, this is all rot. Pull yourself together.' So I did. And started upstairs. I don't know how long I was there. Wood came running after me in the upper hall—well, there you are."

Then Tairlaine remembered.

"Hold on!" he said, rising half-way from his chair. "I know now. Wood mentioned the time he found the body. He said he was going on his rounds to lock up . . . at quarter-past ten. That's it."

Sir George resumed his pacing. He said:

"Roughly, then, if we accept Manning's verdict, the murder occurred in the vicinity of ten o'clock. Let's see. You and I, Michael, were in here talking. First you and Bruce were together, and now you and I. Your case looks better; so does mine. . . . You, Bruce?"

The Teutonic moon-face was squeezed up with thought. Massey made little gestures, like one going over a plan, and spoke slowly.

"We were in here . . . then I took Pat upstairs. Yes. I mixed her a sleeping dose, and tried to quieten her down, and talked for a while; I don't know how long. I left when she was starting to get undressed. No. If you're talking of—of alibis, I don't fancy that's very water-tight. But it's true."

Sir George turned. "Mr. Kestevan?"

"I told you once, and I'll say it as many times as you want me to. I wasn't out of my room."

"Quite. . . . Well, we know Dr. Manning came down to look at Henry's body; then he was sent upstairs to break the news. Whether he went straightaway, we shall have to ask him. Also Lady Rayle. Also Wood, and every other person. It's almost the same situation in Doris's case as it was in the other, because we're not positive Doris wasn't murdered very shortly after or shortly before Lord Rayle. Alibis missing. . . ."

Francis was growing heavy and drowsy. He wore neither the mask of vacancy nor the desperate sparkle; he was merely tired.

"So—what, sir?" he inquired.

"Has it occurred to you," the baronet went on slowly, after he had stared a long time at the armour-hall door, "that this money side of the affair may be merely a red herring? We're all concentrated on the stolen bonds, and the rest of it. But the other features of the affair don't fit in at all. In other words, do you think those bonds were stolen merely as a blind?"

"Nobody," Massey said stolidly, "steals ten thousand pounds merely as a blind."

"Oh, for God's sake, Bruce, use some imagination!" grunted Sir George. "Bonds, even bearer-bonds, aren't like cash. We've got the serial numbers, and the police know how to use 'em. A chap who killed Henry for those bonds would be stark mad. And for the rest of it, the most he—or she—would get would be a few hundreds in cash. Moreover, there's another thing."

"It's this," Sir George continued. "And it doesn't fit in with an ordinary looting of a safe. I mean—the alleged ghost."

"Eh?" said Francis, blinking. "The ghost?"

"You mentioned it while you were driving Michael and me up here this afternoon, when you were playing the cheerful idiot. I don't know why you mentioned it. You said Doris Mundo had been given a bad scare recently, when she thought she saw one of the suits of armour standing on the stairs in the Great Hall. And I don't mind telling you, it worried me."

"Worried you? How?"

Sir George fingered the baggy white waistcoat over his paunch. "For a long time, Frank," he said deliberately, "you've been insisting on the slightly mad streak in your family. It's becoming an obsession. I should be careful, boy. . . . But in all your joking I don't think you realise quite how strong and dangerous it was in your father. Steady, now."

"Go on," said Francis. He turned a stupid face, and his fingers shook.

"I shouldn't have put it past him to do a trick like that. Oh, wait. I don't mean put on a suit of armour. That would be absurd; if *he* didn't consider it absurd, he couldn't have got into a costume which weighed nearly as much as he did. But he might have put on a helmet and a pair of gauntlets, and had a try at frightening the servants. It would have delighted him. Only—I've been afraid that in the midst of his antics he might do something really mad and dangerous. Things of that sort don't look well in print. And servants can sue, beyond all question of making the house a laughing-stock."

Francis said slowly: "I see. And you thought he might have chosen the most superstitious person in the castle—Doris—to scare?"

"I don't think so now. I think it was the murderer, scaring Doris for a very good reason of his own. You mentioned 'moonlight.' Look at those gauntlets." He pointed at the deadly, ugly steel, with the crab-like fingers. "A very weird sort of moonlight would come through those coloured windows on either side of the staircase. If somebody put on the gauntlets, and merely stood motionless on the stairs with his arm along the balustrade—observe, all of you, that the gauntlets will reach half-way up a man's arm—she might readily imagine she had seen a suit of armour walking. Particularly if she had been frightened by such a tale before. Understand? Now do you recall any details of the episode?"

Francis nodded. He was silent for a time, fingering his moustache.

"I don't know whether my old man ever had a go at frightening Doris," he replied at last. "But I know who did. Irene."

"Irene?" Sir George was startled; he seemed almost shocked. "You mean——"

"Oh, hang it, sir, you know her pretty well. You know her views. 'Facing facts.' 'Naked truth.' 'Power.' 'Baldness.' All that sort of rot. She'd be on the scent of any superstition quicker than the hounds; and she was. If she took an interest in Doris, it was for the pleasure of making Doris writhe; *she* called it curing her of nonsense. Delightful, what? I mean to say, I've seen her cross the knives on a breakfast-tray just to make Doris wince. I've seen her jostle Doris to make her drop a hand-glass and smash it. And tell a blood-curdling story merely to shout with laughter afterwards and call Doris a goose or something for believing in it. . . . She said she was making a psycho-analytic subject out of Doris."

Lines of anger, and of a sort of futile shaking, tortured dislike, made a dull mask of Francis's face. He clenched his fists.

He went on slowly: "Sometimes I could have killed that

woman. *There's* your New Science, sir—God damn its rotten core.”

There was a slightly embarrassed pause. For want of something better to do, Tairlaine took out his watch and stared unseeingly at the dial. Massey started to rummage in his brief-case, and then decided the action was too conspicuous; he shifted unhappily. Standing with his stout legs planted apart, Sir George peered with small, shrewd eyes at the other. . . .

“But you don't know definitely of any armour story?” he asked.

“No.”

“Or remember what happened on the night Doris thought she saw the ghost?”

“Yes,” Francis returned in an even voice, “I do, I have very good reason to remember it.” He shivered, and his face seemed to be going to pieces. “Sorry. I can't seem to be the stolid Briton any more to-night. Not—any—more. . . .

“Well, it was late at night; past one, I should say. I was down here in the library, here, in front of this fire, reading, and drinking. . . . But I wasn't drunk,” he said almost fiercely, and stared at them a moment before he dropped his eyes. “I swear I wasn't drunk. Good God, no. I had heard somebody moving about in the drawing-room, or somewhere. It was late for it, of course, but then I didn't pay much attention. I thought it might be Saunders. You see, he brings me a drink every night, and won't go to his room until I turn in. . . .

“Well, I was reading here, and I thought it was Saunders I heard come in at the door. So I didn't look up. I just said, ‘Put it on the table, and for God's sake go to your room.’ And Doris's voice answered.

“I jumped up. They're supposed to be in bed by ten-fifteen, you know. But there she was. Irene had kept her up, talking, to brush her hair. And then Irene remembered that she'd left—or *said* she'd left—a copy of one of her Russian favourites downstairs: drawing-room, or library, or somewhere.

“So she sent Doris down to fetch it. She couldn't remember precisely where the book was, and she knew Doris

was afraid of the dark. So she lit a candle, and gave it to Doris, and warned her not to turn on any lights, or the old man would be furious. Well, Doris couldn't find the book, and there she was apologising to me for breaking in. I helped her hunt for it; then I advised her to go upstairs and tell Irene to go to the devil."

He drew a long breath. Sir George said sharply:

"And then what?"

"I settled back to my reading again. I'd told her to turn on as many lights as she jolly well wanted; I'd have turned them on myself, if I'd known she was so afraid of Irene that she still didn't dare. . . . Then I heard her scream, and I heard the candlestick fall on the floor out in the Great Hall. She was in a dead faint when I got there. I didn't see anything. It wasn't until next day that I learned—indirectly—what she'd seen."

Massey swore softly. For a moment Francis seemed about to amplify what he had already said; he was so obviously thinking of Doris that it was as though he had spoken aloud. But he only said:

"There's the story. Make of it what you like."

CHAPTER XII

THE LIGHTED WINDOW

SIR GEORGE coughed. "You're not sure," he suggested, "whether Lady Rayle didn't——?"

"I'm not sure of anything. And I'm tired of the spotlight. You've heard enough, Mr. Gaunt," Francis said, turning sharply; "what do *you* think of it?"

Gaunt stirred. When his dull eyes opened, it was as though a portrait had come to life.

"I believe I see Dr. Manning coming to join us," he answered reflectively. "I would much prefer to ask him a few questions. . . ."

The physician, adjusting his large prim coat, had marched round the angle of the corridor into the library; he brushed

large pink-nailed hands together, and looked preternaturally solemn.

He said: "I beg your pardon? I thought I heard my name mentioned. . . ."

Gaunt's hand made a slight movement towards his glass. Then Tairlaine was startled to see that the footman, Saunders, was at Gaunt's elbow, pouring out a small drink of brandy; he had not seen Saunders before, and the American wondered how long he had been there. Tapping his cavalier tuft of whisker, Gaunt studied the doctor.

"You have made an examination of the bodies, Dr. Manning?—I am interested particularly in that of the girl."

"A brief one. There must be a full post-mortem report before the inquest."

"There is a reason why I am interested in the girl. We have already decided that she was strangled and dropped from a window into the passage where she was found. From your examination of the body, should you consider this probable?"

The doctor's eyes opened and then narrowed. He nodded. "There were slight—very slight—bruises along the girl's side and left shoulder, and her hip had been wrenched. They might have been caused in a struggle, of course; still . . ."

Sir George growled: "I should think they *were* caused in a struggle. Good Lord, John! You can't toss out a body and have it drop fifteen or twenty feet without having it pretty well smashed up, you know."

"Yes," said Gaunt. "Yes, you can—if it happens to be a dead body. Then it will be absolutely limp. Did you never see clowns and comedians on the stage take the most terrific falls, falls which would break the back of an ordinary man, and bounce up without a bruise? Jockeys, particularly steeplechase-riders, know the same trick. Incidentally, that is why serious injuries rarely happen to drunken men; they can fall downstairs, or even off roofs, without any notable damage, because they are so limp as to be almost boneless. . . . Indeed, the fewer bruises on the girl's body would indicate that she *had* been dropped from the window rather than strangled in the passage itself. She must have put up a

fight. And, with such soft skin, she would have suffered much worse marks by being thrown to the ground in a struggle *while alive*. . . . Am I correct, Doctor?"

"Entirely. Besides, her bones were young and pliable, unlike those of Lord Rayle. Lord Rayle——"

"A moment, if you please." Gaunt tapped the rim of his glass against his teeth, brows drawn down. "I have a theory about Lord Rayle. Tell me if I am right. As you pointed out, he was old and very brittle. I fancy that Lord Rayle, who was merely strangled in a fight and flung down on the floor there in the armour hall, suffered worse injuries than the girl who was dropped fifteen feet. But let me see if I can outline what these injuries were. . . . During this struggle he had been stunned, had he not, by a blow on the head?"

Manning stared. "That is entirely correct, Mr. Gaunt. But how——"

"One leg had been wrenched at the thigh, and he bore marks of having been beaten rather severely?"

"Sir, I don't know how you know all this. But you are quite right."

"The murderer did that," Gaunt said reflectively. "I rather thought so. It is another puzzle. But they all lead to light."

"Now, gentlemen," Dr. Manning went on briskly, after a pause, "I think I have done all I can here this evening. I have had a talk with Inspector Tape, and he will leave a constable to-night if you are uneasy. . . ."

"Oh, my hat," said Francis sharply. "Don't you think we can take care of ourselves?"

The doctor smiled benevolently. "My dear boy, I only suggested——"

"Before you go, Doctor," interposed Gaunt, "we have been bothering ourselves with a few little problems, and we should like your help in bothering us. I was not here early in the evening, but I believe you said that about the time of Lord Rayle's murder you were out looking at your car . . . ?"

Manning's smile became very pronounced, so that the gold in a back tooth appeared with an ecclesiastical glow. He was easy and almost eager.

"Ah, yes. I have just been over all that with Inspector Tape. It is most unfortunate—ah." He pursed his lips, considering. "Also, it was most unfortunate that his lordship's eccentricities were so manifest in that dictaphone record at this time. However . . ."

His smile became almost a grin.

"However, the Inspector has told me of the time at which Doris was killed. As you recall, I had been down here to look at his lordship's body, and at Mr. Steyne's request I went upstairs to inform Lady Rayle. That was, I recall, at about fifteen minutes to ten—some time before the girl's death. I remained with Lady Rayle, as she will attest, until I was summoned to view the poor girl's remains nearly an hour later. I should insist on your questioning her immediately on this point, except that she undoubtedly is in need of sleep after this—ah—trying time. But I trust you will speak to her the first thing in the morning. I shall be here then to convey the bodies to Aldbridge."

Gaunt merely nodded, and Francis extended his hand.

"That's all right, sir," he said. "Thanks no end, Doctor, and good-night. Wood will let you out."

"Still," Manning insisted blandly, as he nodded to the others, "you *will* speak to her on the matter? I should like to establish my facts. I thank you. Good-night, gentlemen."

He sailed out into the drawing-room, a majestic battleship. Francis drew a long breath.

"And now," he said, "bed. I'm exhausted. We can't do anything until morning anyhow. I've had Wood put your things in the King's Room, Mr. Gaunt. I'll show you up now, if you care to go . . . ?"

Gaunt shook his head. "Thanks," he said; "I think I shall sit here for a time. I should not be able to sleep anyhow." For a moment the filmed eyes opened wide, and his hands grew tense along the arms of the chair. He added: "You can sleep. I envy you, Mr. Steyne. I envy you."

. . . It was not until Tairlaine picked up his bedroom candle from a table beside the stairs in the Great Hall that he realised how tired he was. Kestevan and Massey had already gone upstairs, and Francis had disappeared for a

final conference with Inspector Tape. So Tairlaine went upstairs in the company of Sir George, his legs feeling curiously weak.

One o'clock. The single muffled stroke boomed from several clocks through these caverns of rooms. Only a few dim lights burned in the Great Hall; Wood had banked the fires, and the hall was cold. Wood himself stood motionless near the front door, ready to let the inspector out.

In the portrait gallery at the head of the stairs, all the candles had been extinguished. The baronet hesitated. He said: "Well—good-night, old man." He lowered his candle, so that only the feet of the portraits, in steel or hose or strapped trousers, were distinct in the long gallery. "I'm in the Abbot's Room; I go the other way. But, look here: do you think there's a madman wandering about this place? In other words, a killer?"

"Yes," Tairlaine said calmly.

"As a matter of fact," the other said in careful accents, "so do I. I should bolt your door, if I were you. Good-night."

Tairlaine tried to examine his emotions as he went to his own room. Meticulously he laid a finger on his own pulse, and found no disturbance there. If this were fear, it was a fear very different from the sort to which he had been accustomed. A small hammer seemed to pound in his temple, and his heart beat with heavy blows; but he could have sworn that he was not afraid.

He did not turn on the lights in his room. Moonlight flooded in from two windows overlooking the inner courtyard. The walls were very thick, and the windows had their mullioned panes stamped with the Rayle arms; one of them stood open. He could distinguish the tall bedstead, its hangings inscrutably silvered; a fire smouldered beneath the carven mantelpiece, and before it an elbow chair had been drawn up. There was a silver bowl of fruit on a table beside the chair, and a filigreed decanter of whisky.

Holding his candle high, he moved across the room. The yellow flame sprang up in a mirror above a chest of drawers. He stooped, put down his light on the chest of drawers, and stared at himself in the looking-glass.

A thin face, with rather dim eyes and a greying spike of a

beard, confronted him. Many times he had been warned to get glasses; now he blinked at himself, and felt an almost fleshly hunger for liquor crawling along his veins. Yes, he must see an oculist; it was incredible how such considerations could tap at the mind when two stiff figures lay below in the music-room, and a murderer slept beneath the same roof. But in the dark mirror he saw more than this. His eyes hurt him, and he was conscious of a heart bumping against frail ribs; nevertheless, mysterious images had been warmed to life within that mirror.

A New England town, washed by the grey sea. A white house, full of cut glass, where he had breathed the musty air of his youth. Dawn, and water splashed into the twin bowls according to the code by which life had been governed at the preparatory school. A struggling to chapel with eyes glued shut in sleepiness; the letters snatched up, to reveal a stiff-backed father's precepts outlined in spiderlike script—or the Groton playing-fields in spring, when bats cracked against dead wood, and beneath the single-layer leather of his glove the catcher wore a beefsteak to lessen the shock of the driving ball.

Then the still trees round Harvard Yard. The dull red-brick buildings with window-frames etched in white, when the voice of Mr. William James was yet sardonic in the land, and Dr. Oliver Holmes clung chuckling to life. The singing, the dean's list, and—for over thirty years—peace.

Staring at his own reflection, Tairlaine remembered his own quiet rooms in Brattle Street, with the blue china in fire-light and the three white-painted walls of books. This night he had seen murder. He had sensed as swift images all the passions and fury which might knock at the human heart. But somehow he seemed no more moved than though he had been watching the hilarious terrors of a Punch-and-Judy show.

A congenital defect in his own nature? It would be impossible to tell. For—there could be no doubt about it—young Francis Steyne had loved Doris Mundo.

On a sudden impulse Tairlaine moved his hand through the flame of the candle. But he moved it quickly, and felt nothing. Not in any state of madness could he imagine himself so moved as to be remorselessly caught; the pain of the

flame was not for him. In his own past there were only the spectres of pale loves: that Livingston girl, with the yellow roses at her waist, whom he had taken to see William Gillette play at the old Criterion Theatre in New York. Afterwards, with her aunt and uncle following in another cab across-town to Madison Avenue, she had almost leaned against him in the four-wheeler; but he had spoken (most disconcertingly) of Henrik Ibsen. Then there was the sensible blue-stocking from Beacon Hill, whom he had almost married. But—well, why not admit it? He had been afraid. It was so easy to lose those dreams woven out of print and lamplight; the drowsy peace of a library, or the fellowship of the Mermaid Tavern. A wife (poor wretch) was interested in bonnets and small-talk, and in what Mrs. Somebody wore to the tea. Worst of all, she was ambitious for her husband. So, as a matter of cool logic, it would be better to risk no ecstasy, lest it flutter the pages of a single folio.

Abruptly Tairlaine pressed his hand down on the flame of the candle. It disappeared, and he squashed the hot wax under his hand. Now only the skim-milk blue of the moonlight traced out the patterns of windows on the floor. Francis crying in the night, somewhere in this echoing castle, because a small girl had died. . . . Tairlaine groped his way across to the fireplace, poured out half a tumbler of whisky, and drank it without winking.

He felt better. But he found that he partook something of Lord Rayle's moods, in this castle where electricity was merely an anachronism. So he lit the candles which were always kept ready on the mantelpiece for the use of right-minded guests, and sat down to undress. His dressing-gown was hung up in the closet. Odd—to find closets instead of wardrobes here. They must have been made by taking blocks out of the immense walls, at some recent date. He had noticed them before, with some surprise, in Lord Rayle's rooms. Their doors were thick oaken slabs, making each closet like a small sound-deadening room. But then, he reflected with an uneasy glance at the bed, vermin must multiply in the ancient wooden wardrobes. . . .

The night was pleasantly cool without being cold. After poking up the fire, he went over to one window in his

dressing-gown, sat down on the edge of the deep embrasure, and lighted his pipe. Danger of rheumatism, of course—one had to be careful, at his age—but he was lulled by the prospect outside.

A faint mist. The spectral courtyard, with windows opposite faintly silvered by moonlight, and (very dim now) the murmur of the waterfall. Far across the court he could see that covered balcony just above the arches of the cloister; the balcony which ran outside the rooms of Lord and Lady Rayle.

One window was alight.

Tairlaine was conscious of a great drowsiness, and of cricks in his spine from being propped against the stone embrasure, but he did not move. Somewhere an owl cried, and the breeze ran in trees with long and murmurous swishings. The American found his eyes fixed upon that lighted window. From nowhere in the castle was there a sound; nor any light, save that lonely window pale beneath the hood of the balcony.

He frowned, lifting his pipe to count the windows. Yes, that would be Lady Rayle's bedroom. The cool air ran a prickly finger up his back, yet he was not moved by any sense of tragedy now. This castle, dark under a setting moon, showed too disembodied, too unreal; it was like something out of the Ingoldsby Legends, filled with conventional wickedness and equally conventional ghosts. They were not very frightening, these ghosts; they groaned and rattled a chain or two, and uttered formal sentiments as alike and commonplace as the greetings on Christmas cards. You might doubt that they had ever frightened even Horace Walpole or the romantic Mrs. Radcliff. Something more, something much more, was required to strike the real bell of fear. . . .

Tairlaine stared. He had been almost hypnotised by the small lighted window against the dark pile across the court. . . . Near the window, a crack of light extended itself vertically. Lady Rayle's bedroom door had been opened.

There was a noise, like a very faint, vicious barking. A small shadow scurried at the foot of the glow; then another shadow moved, and the barking died as though it had been

choked away. The narrow light disappeared as the door closed.

Lady Rayle's dog, Tairlaine reflected. It had almost escaped, and she had dragged it back. He was conscious of increasing drowsiness; he lowered himself from the embrasure, blew out the candles, and sought his bed.

At the time he believed that he did not close an eye that night. Swollen dreams, and images like tall people with masks, boiled through a half-waking state; all the fears he had tried to repress invaded his brain then. The bed felt cold and lumpy, and once he thought he had cried out. But he must have slept, because, when again he returned to complete wakefulness, a cold pallor—not quite dawn—was grey against the windows. All night he thought he had heard the ivy stirring outside the panes, and a noise as of somebody climbing in. He had a vague recollection that once Sir George's final warning, "You'd better bolt your door," murmured and rang against his ears; and that he actually had got up in his bare feet to bolt it. For a long time he had heard footsteps walking slowly through his half-doze. . . .

Now he lay wide awake, trembling a little. His eyes were heavy, and his frail bones ached. Birds had begun to move and twitter in the vines with an insistent petulant chorus; he heard a whir of wings. But he heard also those sombre footfalls which he could have sworn had been a part of his dream.

The chill before dawn was sharp, and the footsteps were distinct. By their echo, he knew that somebody was pacing in the cloisters below. The world was full of birds twittering and fluttering their wings. His flesh shaking and his head slightly dizzy, Tairlaine got up, fumbling for his dressing-gown. The slippers were harder to find, but their cloth thickness felt grateful against the cold stone floor. He crossed to the window and blinked out.

The courtyard swam in half-light. Against the sky there were thin pinkish hints of dawn, but the battlements mingled still with night. Those footfalls under the arches of the cloister still went on, measuredly.

And the lamp in Lady Rayle's room still burned. . . .

Life, when most things were dead, and only the birds

stirred; the lamp was small life, keeping guard. There was also a sense of keeping guard in the lonely footsteps pacing the stones. Tairlaine never knew whether, in leaning out, he had made some noise against the casement of the window. But the footfalls stopped. Into the middle of the court moved a tall, thin figure, which stood for a moment motionless in the immensity of the cobblestones, looking up at him.

Then the figure beckoned. For a moment terror tightened in Tairlaine's chest. With silent weirdness, something had moved out from beneath the ancient arches; it bore at least the semblance of a man, though no features could be distinguished. And it beckoned him down to share its ghostly walk.

Tairlaine stared a long time before he saw that it was John Gaunt.

Instinctively he moved over after clothes. He thought: This is absurd. That I, Michael Tairlaine, should leave a warm bed at this hour of the morning, and go downstairs to walk a draughty cloister with a slightly mad elderly man like myself—and all for no good reason except that it is his whim to have companionship—this, I know, is absurd. But he went.

As he found his way downstairs through the dimness of the great pile, he heard a faint noise of alarm-clocks going off. And a certain relief warmed him under his thick overcoat. The pinkish tints had unfurled to thin streamers in the sky beyond the eastern towers, but a mist was still in the courtyard when he joined Gaunt.

The latter, buttoned up in a black overcoat and with a soft black hat pulled down on his eyes, did not speak. He merely handed his tobacco-pouch to Tairlaine. The American filled and lighted his pipe, and fell into step beside Gaunt under the damp arches of the cloisters.

They walked thus without speaking, until the terrors of the night slowly ebbed out of Tairlaine. They walked thus until movement grew louder within the castle; until doors opened, and chimneys began to curl with smoke, and the dawn broadened beyond the battlements.

And they were still walking when a girl screamed from the balcony above. A housemaid, ill with sleep and fright, was

clinging to the balustrade, still screaming, when they found her. It took minutes for her to tell them that she had found Lady Rayle lying across a lounge in her dressing-room—shot through the heart.

CHAPTER XIII

LORD RAYLE'S CLOSET

TAIRLAINE never knew how Gaunt quieted the girl, so that the rest of the house did not become alarmed. It did not seem to be so much what he said, even in Gaunt's own kindly fashion; but it was one of those things which belong to personality rather than to words. As a matter of fact, Tairlaine was not unduly curious. He knew that he had smoked half a dozen pipes on an empty stomach, and this new horror, no less than the physical cause, turned his stomach to water.

Quietly Gaunt was questioning. The stammered story was plain. This girl was Annie Morrison, a rather dull-faced housemaid with a stocky figure, who had been Doris Mundo's room-mate. She had been delegated by Mrs. Carter to rise at an early hour, go to the two bathrooms on the second floor, and attend to the fire in the heaters so that there should be warm shaving-water for the guests at eight o'clock. Crossing the upper hallway, she had seen that the door leading to the balcony was open, and that light shone out from Lady Rayle's room. Since her ladyship often neglected to turn out the light in either her bedroom or dressing-room when she happened to fall asleep, and his lordship was angered by this neglect, Annie had gone down to attend to the matter at once.

Peering in at the window of the bedroom, she had discovered that the bed was unoccupied. She knocked, and received no answer. Entering the bedroom door, which was unlocked, she discovered that Lady Rayle was not in the room at all. Then she had knocked at the dressing-room door, and, still receiving no response, had poked her head inside.

Annie Morrison tried to describe what she had seen in the dull light of dawn, but she relapsed into tears and incoherencies. Gaunt patted her shoulder; his eyes were darting about the balcony.

"Listen, my dear," he said gently. "Nobody must know of this; for a while, at least. Do you understand?" He waited for the girl's sobs to subside. "I am in the King's Room; you hear?—*the King's Room*. Go down and stay there until I call for you. If anybody comes in, pretend to be making up the room. Off you go, now!"

His face showed pale and ugly against the whitening light as he stared after her retreating figure.

"You don't think," Tairlaine said, "that we'd better wake up Frank Steyne?"

Gaunt said almost exultantly: "I have the field to myself. Entirely to myself, for the first time since I handled the Mordray murder in Paris. Come along, Doctor."

Over his hands he drew a pair of thin kid gloves, and pushed open the bedroom door. Tairlaine told him quickly of what he had seen last night, the appearance of the dog and its barking suddenly dying away. Nodding, Gaunt stared with narrowed eyes about the lighted bedroom.

It was as polished, sharp-angled, and modern as the dressing-room Tairlaine had seen last night. Against one wall a long low bedstead projected some distance; the covers were tumbled, and showed the impress of a body. A pale silver lamp was burning at the head of this bed. On the table beside which the lamp stood, a paper-bound book had been put down, with an elaborate Japanese knife marking the place, and a half-eaten chocolate had been balanced on the edge of a silver ash-tray. Two yellow boxes of Gold Flake cigarettes stood beside it.

Tairlaine heard a thin noise of Gaunt tapping the stem of his pipe against his teeth. The American tried to follow Gaunt's glance. . . .

He saw the other frown. Apparently the detective was looking at a low, square chair, across which had been carefully laid a woman's negligée. It was of very heavy lace, a violent peach colour, and with flowing sleeves. Tairlaine's rather bewildered bachelor eyes followed Gaunt's gaze down to two peach-coloured, slipper-like affairs, with bows on

them, which stood side by side at the foot of the bed. From these, the detective's puzzled eyes moved to an open closet door. . . .

He went swiftly across to the door communicating with the dressing-room. When he opened it, the morning light through the one window was sufficiently strong for the whole ugly scene to be clear at a glance.

Lady Rayle lay on her back across the chaise-longue whereon Tairlaine had seen her last night. Tumbled there, her throat curved up and her loosened red hair drooping towards the floor, she lay with arms thrown out as though she had greeted death with invitation. But her blank eyes were squeezed up with pain, and the dry lipstick had cracked on a pain-wrenched mouth. She wore a sleeveless night-gown of a pale green colour; sleeveless, Tairlaine could see, because her rather dingy black wrapper had been pulled back from her shoulders. Most distinct of all were the dark splotches on the breast of the green nightdress. Her whole chest seemed to have been blown out.

Tairlaine started as he felt Gaunt's fingers close on his arm. The detective's eyes were not sleepy now; and his voice was fierce with something like triumph.

"He may have betrayed himself," Gaunt said. "He may have betrayed himself here. He didn't, materially, last night. But there may be something as sharp and clean as a bullet—and I can prove it on him——"

Tairlaine's dull thoughts were centred round the blood, and he shuddered. He said: "You mean, the murderer? You have an idea——?"

Turning slowly, Gaunt looked at him out of bitter, abstracted eyes.

"I knew who the murderer was," he answered, "before I had been in this house an hour. In the testimony I heard, and in the testimony you heard, one person told so obvious and damning a lie that I knew him at once. But he's clever. He left us no definite proof. It may be here. Come."

Reflecting on it afterwards, the American knew that it was not precisely a nauseated horror he had felt, because he seemed incapable of feeling anything. It was as though he were slowly succumbing to a sleeping-dose. He felt himself drawn to the lounge on which the stiff body lay. . . .

"Three bullets fired," Gaunt said slowly, as he bent over. "And—look there!—one of them as cleanly through the heart as any wound I ever saw. The other two were a bit wide of the mark; a few inches or so." He clucked his tongue. "Nightgown burnt out with the powder all around them. The weapon was held immediately against her body."

After that, Tairlaine did not look, but he heard Gaunt's voice.

"That wrapper is odd. Old, and it's torn. So are the slippers she's wearing. I say, Doctor, you heard no shots last night?"

"None."

"But you heard the dog barking?"

"Very faintly."

"Which reminds me." Gaunt turned towards the bedroom again. As he hurried through that door, Tairlaine had an almost hysterical impulse to follow him, but he clenched his fists and stood rigid beside Lady Rayle. Gaunt reappeared in a moment.

"That's all right," he said quietly. "I've found the dog's body. He's been strangled, and he was lying under the bed. The dog tried to get away; the murderer followed him through this room into the bedroom, and strangled him before he should give the alarm. . . . Let's see. Yes, the window of *this* room is open. And I don't think . . . lend a hand, Doctor, if you please . . . I don't think the weapon was left behind. Take a look, will you?"

It was only a perfunctory sort of look, so far as Tairlaine was concerned: He was not precisely sure where he ought to search; he turned over a sofa pillow or two, lying on the floor, and glanced stupidly at the other articles of furniture. Muttering under his breath, Gaunt moved about swiftly. He paused only once to look over sharply at Tairlaine.

"You met her, Doctor?" he demanded. "A strong-minded woman, I should think?"

"Not afraid of—of hell," said Tairlaine. "I think that was one of the reasons why I didn't like her."

"Quite so. That much is obvious. Ah, here we are." With one gloved hand he dived behind the body, and produced a small revolver with a goat's-foot trigger: so small

a revolver that it would have fitted into the palm of an ordinary man's hand.

"But that——" said Tairlaine, "*that* little thing——"

"A Browning .22," Gaunt answered, turning the shiny toy over in his hand. "Oh, no, Doctor. This didn't kill her. The weapon that killed her was a very much heavier calibre; a forty-five, I should think, on the pattern of an army pistol. This belongs to her. Yes. Here are the initials on the grip. . . .

"Did you ever see a man hit by a bullet from a service revolver, Doctor?" he continued, after a pause. He was staring at the pistol in his hand. "I have been—forced to—use one, several times. It does more than blow the body wide open. There was a man in Rangoon once. I was a small fraction of a second before his knife when I fired. He'd been a wrestler; the Commissioner will tell you the story. Anyway, he weighed over thirteen stone. The impact of the bullet knocked him across the room like a bowling-pin. And . . . you see it here . . . Lady Rayle's feet are not even out of her slippers."

Gaunt was almost smiling. He walked about the lounge, staring at it.

"This murderer is clever, Doctor. He has a brilliant imagination. That was why he was able to kill Lord Rayle in the way he did. Let's see. It would be too much to hope for, and yet—her left hand, I should fancy . . ."

He took the stiff fingers in his own.

"Yes. It wasn't inevitable, but you have it here. A smear of wax at the joining of the thumb and forefinger."

Tairlaine rubbed a hand over tired eyes. "Well?" he asked dully. "What does that mean?"

Gaunt went over to the window. After an examination of the open sash, he turned again and struck a match to light his pipe. The match-flame made gleams in his sunken eyes.

"Suppose, my friend," he said, "we hear your reconstruction. What happened here?"

"I don't know. I can't reconstruct anything. . . . Sleep; I feel as though I hadn't slept for three days." Tairlaine hesitated. Then, in his cold and muddled state, he spoke words which his ordinary conservative and reticent self would

never have uttered. "All I can think of is some sort of assignation. . . ."

"It was no assignation," Gaunt said sombrely. "Far, very far from it. What did happen is damnably clear." His eyes had grown dull again.

"She was lying in bed, reading and eating chocolates. She heard a noise which she considered suspicious. It was not here in the dressing-room; it was in Lord Rayle's rooms beyond. And she was a brave woman. She got up, put on a wrapper and slippers, and took the Browning from her table drawer. She went through Lord Rayle's dressing-room, immediately beyond here, and into his bedroom, where she lit a candle.

"Her surmise had been entirely correct. The murderer was there. Specifically, he was hidden in the closet in Lord Rayle's room. She saw a movement, and went over to investigate. It was only when she opened the closet door that he acted. He knocked over her light, threw a hand across her mouth, and drew her inside; she had seen him, and knew who he was. He pulled the closet door shut, held her against him in the dark, and fired three bullets into her body. Only afterwards did he carry her into this room and throw her on the lounge. The dog ran from him, through this room into the bedroom, and so the dog was strangled. . . . I think that we shall find proof of this if we examine Lord Rayle's bedroom."

Tairlaine looked at him steadily. "I hope you're being serious," he said, after a long silence. "You haven't looked in there, you know. You couldn't possibly know all that."

"We must look. But I think I can explain in a moment. . . ." Gaunt hesitated, regarding him with a curious expression which was almost a smile. He moved across the room.

"Yes. The door to Lord Rayle's dressing-room is open," he added, turning the knob, "though I think you were told that she generally kept it locked on her side. Here's the key. H'm."

Not even the window had been washed in the late peer's dressing-room. But in the murky light they saw that "dressing-room" was a mere complimentary term. All Lord Rayle seemed to have done, as a rule, was to dress in

the bedroom and draw on one of those robes from the closet there; this apartment was dusty, but almost neat. They went from there into the bedroom.

Apparently it was just as it had been the night before. Tairlaine could not be sure, because he had not examined it minutely in their brief search then. But Gaunt indicated a candle in a brass holder, standing on a table immediately to the right of the door as you entered from the dressing-room. It was broken in the middle, and sagged drunkenly; down one side ran a winding-sheet of grease.

Gaunt said: "The murderer put it back, just as it was when she had picked it up as she came in. That was thoughtful. The trail begins to clear. A look at the closet, now. I wish we had a better light. . . ."

"There was a flashlight here last night. It may be still about."

Pinching his forehead, Gaunt peered into the recesses of the room.

"I don't see it now. Of course not. . . . But no matter. My lighter will do."

He strode over to the closet door and said, "Closed, you see. The murderer was careful." Then he snapped on the flame of his cigar-lighter and pulled open the high, thick door.

"A knob on the inside, you see. I rather thought we should find one. *Don't touch it!* Just sniff the air, Doctor. The door has been closed since the murder. That was an oversight; our friend the killer should have thought of it. You smell cordite, don't you? Quite so. The shots were fired here. . . . Ha! Now we have it." He was kneeling, almost gabbling away, with the flame of his lighter moving along the floor. "Spots of candle-grease. She dropped her light. It went out quickly, of course, or it might have set fire to these robes. The place is a room by itself. Door—well, judge for yourself. Three inches thick, I should say. *Well, my friend?* This is most revealing. Again our murderer has been wasting time. He didn't let her lie here. Quite to the contrary. He was so anxious to have us believe she had been killed in the other room, and to direct our glance away from this closet, that he took great pains. Not only did he carry her into her own room, but he picked up the

candle and set it again on its table by the door. . . . Why didn't he want this closet to come under scrutiny? Ah—you see something? Quick, Doctor! What is it?"

Tairlaine could not answer. He was groping again in his brain for something briefly seen and only half remembered. In the flicker of candles, with men stumbling and growling about him, he had incuriously contemplated that closet when Francis came up here to test the window. He remembered the ghostly white robes hanging inside. Now—there was something *different* about it, some subtle change impossible to identify. It was not that the contents of the closet had been thrown about; they seemed no different as he studied them at close range. Yet there had been a change. The nature of this change he might remember in a flash, or not at all. For the moment, he could only meet Gaunt's steady, savage eyes with a puzzled shake of the head.

"I don't know," he answered. "I suppose I'm no help. Still——"

"I might suggest it to you," the other said slowly. "But I want you to be sure without it, because it might merely be suggestion, and then I should be no forrader. In passing, I might point out that one of these robes is wrinkled almost beyond recognition. Look at it! Even for Lord Rayle, it is sadly crumpled, as though . . ."

He hesitated, and when Tairlaine's expression showed that this intelligence conveyed nothing, Gaunt rose with a wry smile. But first he bent forward to feel along the floor of the closet.

"No ejected shells," he commented. "Which may either mean that the weapon was a barrel pistol and did not discharge its shells; or—which is more likely—an automatic, and the murderer carefully picked them up to distract attention. Witness his care in the matter of the candle."

"But I don't see . . .". Tairlaine paused, and then gestured. "It must have happened the way you say. But how did you know it? What indications were there?"

"Eh?" said Gaunt, turning. "Indications?"

"Well, how did you know there was an intruder—not somebody she was expecting? How did you decide she must have been killed in here?"

"Oh, that's unimportant. And it's too easy." Gaunt

seemed irritated, and he was pinching his chin abstractedly as he stared at the closet. "She was lying in bed reading. Somebody came into one of these four rooms along this side. If the person who came in were an intruder with burglarious intent, he didn't come into her bedroom. She had time to put a paper-knife in the pages of her book—a strong-minded, steady-nerved woman—and put down a half-eaten chocolate carefully on the side of a tray. Also she had time to take the pistol she carried out of some drawer, and go to her wardrobe (you saw its door was open) to get the wrapper and slippers she is wearing now.

"Did the intruder come into her sitting-room? Again, no. If she had been going into her own sitting-room to confront a burglar or malefactor, she would instinctively have picked up that very fancy, heavy lace robe which you saw beside her bed, and put *that* on, as well as the slippers which were immediately at hand. Instead, being a fastidious woman, she chose——?"

Gaunt paused, moving his head towards the other rooms.

"Yes," Tairlaine said slowly. "She put on probably the oldest and dingiest wrapper in her wardrobe——"

"To venture into a sort of pigsty. Yes. Into her husband's rooms. You also see why this was no appointment or assignation on her part; no matter with whom an appointment had been, she would scarcely have worn that ancient cotton wrapper."

"And the closet in Lord Rayle's room?"

"Ah! I had already bethought myself of that closet. But even the conditions here indicated it. The outer walls of these rooms are comparatively thick, and the windows loose-framed. In addition to this, the windows in Lady Rayle's rooms were open. So heavy-a pistol, fired three times, must certainly have been heard in those two rooms, and in all probability in Lord Rayle's rooms also; the crash of a .45 is hellish. The noise, then, would have been heard by you, who were sitting at your window—unless . . . ?"

He indicated the closet. Tairlaine remembered looking into the closet in his own room: an almost sound-proof stone cavern, with an oak door several inches thick. . . .

"Unless," he supplied, "she were killed inside one of those, with the door shut."

"There is no other place it could have happened," Gaunt said simply. "As to the murderer's hiding there, it is hardly likely that he fell upon her in this room and dragged her there to kill her. You observe, he allowed her to light the candle unmolested, and the smooth and intact condition of her very fragile clothing proves there was no struggle. Had there been any sort of attack as she lit the candle, she must have fired a bullet or cried out, in addition to having her clothes torn—for, witness, the wounds are *in front*. Inference, he was hiding in the only possible place; he wanted to escape discovery. But he was discovered, probably . . ."

Gaunt hesitated.

"Probably by the dog," he said thoughtfully, "and the dog's mistress went over to investigate. I am inclined to believe it was the dog who set up an alarm in the first place, and called Lady Rayle to investigate in her husband's quarters. There, of course, we are on the grounds of pure speculation. The murderer did not dare put a bullet through the dog, for fear of the noise in the open room; he did not catch the dog, which darted back into the other room to alarm his mistress. It was only after the murder, when he feared discovery by the noise of barking, that the killer chased that dog into the other room and strangled it."

All the while Gaunt had been speaking without thinking even of his own words. He was still staring at the closet, his eyes narrowed. . . .

"But all this, Doctor, is beside the point. Every bit of evidence points towards that closet; but *why*? I mean to say: what did the murderer want when he crept in here last night? He wanted to shift attention away from it; again, why?"

"Well?"

"I think I know," the other said irritably, "but I don't want to lead your imagination. I want you to remember why that closet looks different, and what the very wrinkled robe suggests to you. . . . In the meantime, how can we turn this latest stroke of the killer to our own advantage?"

He began to pace up and down, hammering his fist into his palm fiercely. He was speaking to himself now.

"Was it the left or the right? Damn me, I can't remember. Yes . . . no, I have it. It was the right. We'll

try the left, then. I want a sheet of Rayle's writing-paper, and . . ." He turned, jerking his arm. "And, Doctor, you would oblige me by looking about to see whether you can find a tin of talcum powder. It would be most helpful."

CHAPTER XIV

THE WHYS AND WHEREFORES OF A LIE

"LADY RAYLE has been murdered," said John Gaunt, rising from the breakfast-table.

He had let them finish their breakfasts. The great clock in the dining-hall had just struck nine. Beyond the painted windows a pale sun was strengthening on faces grown subtly more cheerful, but it needed only a second to change them. Francis had come down for breakfast; so had Sir George, Massey, and Kestevan; Dr. Manning had entered, fresh-shaven and paternal, a moment before, and he had accepted a cup of coffee.

The last clang of the clock-stroke fell jarring into the dead hush. Then somebody rattled the cover of a dish, and Wood moved in deftly to right it before Sir George let it clatter on the floor. Francis, who had been helping himself to kippers at the sideboard, did not turn round; he stood motionless, squeezing hard on the ledge of the sideboard.

For several hours Tairlaine had been waiting for it. Each tick of the clock had brought nearer that smash of revelation, and he had waited as for a blow at the jaw. Now only the silver dish-cover rattled. Tairlaine tried to watch faces, yet he could see only Gaunt standing tall and thin above the table, twisting the eyeglass in and out of his fingers. Before breakfast Gaunt had said only one thing: "*No matter what I say, agree with it.*" Now Gaunt tapped the eyeglass almost negligently. . . .

Kestevan had turned very pale. He seemed to be looking almost literally cross-eyed. Starting to push himself to his feet, he seemed to have bunched pieces of the tablecloth in his fingers, and his mouth worked. But it was Francis who spoke first.

"When did she die?" he asked in a steady voice. "You mean she was strangled?"

"No," said Gaunt. "She was shot three times, the last time directly through the heart, in her own dressing-room. It occurred some time last night, but we did not discover the body until this morning."

Again the unnatural silence, so profound that Tairlaine heard Wood moving out at the door. Francis started a slightly hysterical laugh as he leaned on the sideboard; then he checked himself, tightening his lips, and walked over to the table grimly.

"Well," he said. "Well. That's that. I wonder if she takes death so easily *now*."

He glanced curiously at Kestevan. Still in a half-sitting, half-standing position, the actor was staring at the door to the Great Hall; his eyes seemed to hold a vision. He commenced to get completely to his feet. Then he shuddered and sat down again.

"No, Kestevan," Francis said in a detached way, "I shouldn't go up to her, if I were you. You might not find the sight pretty."

The actor said:

"I don't mean that, damn you. I was thinking of Patricia. Is she——?"

"She is still sleeping," Gaunt put in. "Did any of you gentlemen hear a disturbance last night?"

"No," said Sir George, "I didn't. And if I had," he added slowly, "I'm not sure that I should have investigated it."

"Mr. Massey?"

The secretary shook his head dully. He had not lifted it since the announcement. "No. I'm at the other side of the house. Who—who found her?"

"One of the housemaids. Mr. Kestevan?"

"Eh? What did . . . a dis—oh! No. *No!*"

"And of course, Dr. Manning," continued Gaunt, with a faint smile, "since you were not here, you could scarcely have heard anything."

The doctor dabbed his lips vigorously with a napkin; his big face seemed to have white splotches, like a disease. He said:

"*Lady Rayle* . . . it is shocking, of course; I—why was I not informed before?"

"Dr. Tairlaine and I have been doing some investigating. We have not disturbed the body; it is in the sitting-room. Apparently she had been reading in bed. She seems to have heard a noise, or to have been lured into the other room on some pretext. In any event, she is dead."

"Yes," said Dr. Manning, nodding several times and staring at the table. "I—I think you said—shot?"

"With a heavy revolver, I should think."

All the time he had been speaking, one of Gaunt's hands was concealed behind a sugar-bowl; Tairlaine saw that he was making curious hen tracks on the tablecloth with a pencil.

"And—by the same person who killed . . . ?" Francis finished the question by lifting his eyebrows.

"Undoubtedly."

"But why *Irene*? Why the devil was he messing about in her room?"

"Another puzzle, Mr. Steyne. I confess I can throw no light on it at the present moment. Robbery seems to be out of the question; there was some very valuable jewellery in her dressing-room. . . ." He paused, frowning at the hen tracks he had made. "But, to begin with, Mr. Steyne. Who in the house owns a pistol which might have been used in this affair?"

"Pistol?—H'm. We're rather lacking in pistols. The Trophy Room has the usual guns—rook rifles, things like that—oh, yes; there's an old .32 Smith and Wesson I used to take pot-shots at rabbits with, but so far as I know it hasn't been fired for some time. And I believe *Irene* herself owns a smaller one."

"This was of considerably heavier a calibre than either, I fancy. The doctor will be able to tell us."

Francis closed one eye and lifted the other eyebrow; he looked at once dangerous and whimsical. "Except," he said, "except my own service automatic: a forty-five."

"I see," Gaunt answered imperturbably. "And where is that?"

"I'm dashed if I know. I haven't seen the thing in years. You can't use it on small game; blows 'em to pieces like

a 30-30.—Tell you what, though. Saunders might know. He's a sort of personal servant for me, and attends to my things; he's especially interested in anything pertaining to the army. . . . I say, Wood?"

The butler reappeared, his head inclined. "Yes, sir?"

"Fetch Saunders, will you? He'll be tidying up my room now. . . . And, Wood!"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell Lee to have a look round the Trophy Room, will you? Tell him to see if he can find a pistol of a heavier calibre than a .32. Now, Mr. Gaunt?"

"I am impatiently awaiting the arrival of Inspector Tape. There is a reason why he must be on hand. Also, I should like to borrow one of your footmen to go to Aldbridge and send two telegrams. . . . Let me see: if I remember correctly, Lord Rayle's solicitors are Simpson and Simpson, are they not, Mr. Massey?"

The other nodded. "I can give you the full address, if you like."

"Thank you. And his bank?"

"Great Midland, London branch. The manager's name is Harlan Dale."

Gaunt wrote it down on an envelope. "To proceed. Dr. Manning, I dislike opening the subject again, but it becomes more and more important, and I did not have the opportunity to question you about it last night. It concerns Doris Mundo."

"Ah, yes," said the doctor, adjusting his glasses. "Another—ah—tragic affair, in more respects than one."

Gaunt said: "Let me see. I think you said, Mr. Steyne, that she was a favourite of your sister, as well as a pretended favourite of your late stepmother. Would you mind stepping upstairs and seeing if your sister can join us as soon as possible?"

A curious look, a sort of communication, passed between Gaunt and Francis then. The detective had spoken almost negligently. But Francis seemed to understand. He nodded and sauntered out, his hands in the pockets of an old dark jacket.

"And now, Doctor," Gaunt continued: "you were summoned here last evening to look at the girl, were you

not? Exactly. You found her with child. Was it a matter of—long standing?”

“Three months, more or less, I should say. It was impossible to make a more than superficial examination outside my office.”

“Now . . . this is important. Did you inquire about what is politely called ‘the man in the case’?”

The doctor flushed somewhat. “Professional ethics——”

“Please answer my question, Doctor.”

“Well,” said Manning, “as a matter of fact, yes. I had been specifically asked to do so by both Lord Rayle and Mrs. Carter, who serves as a sort of mother to the girls. . . . But Doris refused to tell. She adopted a somewhat—ah—melodramatic attitude, and wept considerably.”

“Did she say anything which might lead you to hazard a guess?”

“My dear sir, I am not a detective.”

“Be so good as to answer me, if you please.”

With an effort Manning said: “Only one thing, I remember. No, I can’t recall it exactly. It was—it was something like, ‘I love him, and now I can’t tell him. I wish I’d known.’ Her accent was difficult to understand, and——”

“To whom did you imagine this to refer?”

“I don’t know!” Manning started to rise. “You have no official capacity here, sir, and I must insist——”

“Thank you, Doctor. . . . Ah, come in, Wood. And this, I take it, is Saunders . . . ?”

Wood stood aside as the big footman with the clumsy hands moved past him stolidly. Saunders was very quiet, but his eye roved. Sitting down, Gaunt studied him for a moment.

“Saunders,” he said presently, “you are Mr.—excuse me, the new Lord Rayle’s personal attendant, are you not?”

The footman blinked slightly at mention of this new title. Tairlaine himself heard it for the first time with a sort of shock.

“Sir,” said the footman, “in addition to my other duties. Yes, sir.”

“You have been with him a long time?”

“Seventeen years, sir.”

“His lordship has told us that among his belongings there

used to be a service automatic, forty-five calibre, but that he hasn't seen it for a long time. Do you know of this gun?"

Saunders nodded, his dull eyes fixed steadily on Gaunt. "Yes, sir, I knows of it. But if the Master wants it—well, sir, I'm sorry. It's broke."

"Broke?"

"I mean ter say," Saunders went on, with some animation, "it's busted, sir. I busted it myself. Also, it's lost. It's been lost for months. I didn't dare tell him, but I busted it. On account of the weasels. And trying to put in wrong ammunition. I jammed 'er, that is to say——" He swallowed hard, blinked, and went on,—“I tried to make repairs, and couldn't. But I've a friend wot's a marvel. At repairing guns. So I says to 'im, I say, 'Ere, Jamey,' I says, 'ere's Mr. Francis's gun. Shove it in your pocket and 'ave a look at it.' 'Righto, mate,' 'e says. Which 'e did, sir. . . ."

"Take it easy, Saunders," Gaunt suggested. The footman was almost on the point of gesturing in his rapid talk.

"Well, sir, a week afterwards 'e comes back to me, Jamey does. 'Ere,' says Jamey, gruff-like, 'ere, old man, I'm sorry as blazes, but I've lost your blinking gun.' 'Lost it?' says I. 'So 'elp me,' says Jamey"—at this juncture Saunders lifted his right hand—"like this," says 'e. 'You know the ocean?' 'Wot ocean?' says I, suspicious-like. 'The ocean,' says Jamey. 'The one that has Carnival Cove in it?' 'Yus,' says I. 'Well,' says Jamey, 'I takes me girl for a bit of a row in Carnival Cove, with the gun in me 'ip pocket. I says to me girl, I says, 'Wot about slippin' us a kiss?' 'Orright,' says she, gigglin' like; 'but mind you don't tip the boat.' 'Blow the boat,' I says, and gets up. But it did tip, mate. And while I was a-righting meself, be blowed if the gun didn't fall out of me 'ip pocket into the water.' " Saunders jerked his chin, blinking at Gaunt, and added darkly: "That's what 'e *said*, sir, anyway. So 'elp me. But I've 'ad me doubts."

Gaunt regarded him with a pleased expression.

"I can scarcely blame you, Saunders. So the gun lies full fathom five? Well, that's too bad. . . ."

Saunders drew a long breath. From his pocket Gaunt

took the small, glittering pistol with the goat's-foot trigger: the weapon he had found near Lady Rayle. He swung it between the tips of his fingers thoughtfully before holding it out.

"Have you ever seen *this* one before?"

Saunders took the weapon and inspected it with a wrinkled frown. He had become almost loquacious. "Funny little thing, sir, ain't it—if you'll pardon me? I meanersay, I can put me whole 'and round it. No, sir. I never saw it before."

"Thank you. Now, there is just one other thing. . . . You have been very observant in the past. If my information is correct, it was you who noticed Mr. Kestevan crossing the court early last night—going towards the donjon at the rear?"

"Yes, sir," Saunders's eyes moved towards the actor, and narrowed.

"Where were you then: in the court itself?"

"Yes, sir. And not far away."

"That is what made me curious," Gaunt nodded. "Do your duties customarily take you out there in the dark at night?"

Saunders looked at him in dull surprise. "My—yes, sir. Attending on Mr. Francis, like I said. *Ow!* *Ow*, I see!" He moved his head ponderously. "Why, you see, sir, the Master's room, it's at the rear of the 'ouse. Mr. Wood, the butler, says I clutter up the passages when I go through them to see after the Master's room so often. So 'e suggests I go out into the court and up by the rear staircase—there's a door through one of the rooms as ain't used, you see—at the back. Just hopposite the door to the donjohn, across the court. That's the way I 'appened to notice, sir."

"That's all, Saunders. Thank you."

The footman seemed about to ask a question. But he shut his lips, tried a clumsy imitation of Wood's inclination of the head, and lumbered out. Gaunt stared after him with a faint smile. . . .

Dr. Manning snorted. "The man's lying, of course. Excuse me, Mr. Gaunt, but why didn't you trip him up? It was so palpable—so—well——!"

"Ah," said Gaunt. "What do *you* think, Mr. Massey?"

"About the gun?" inquired the secretary, who was

scratching at the tablecloth with a fork. "Well, I don't know, but it didn't sound very convincing, you know. That is—hang it!" He shifted uncomfortably.

"And you, Sir George?"

"I'm not so sure. No. Look here, John—didn't it strike you as a bit *too* obviously naïve and false; a bit *too* spur-of-the-moment? It seems to me that nobody could be such a fool, or so careless, if he were telling a falsehood. I may be wrong. But the man might be consummately clever; he might tell us a wild story which you might be more inclined to believe merely because it was so incredible. You understand? Then, if he had faked plausible evidence to support his lie, you would be almost certain to credit him. . . . Or am I trying to be over-subtle?"

Gaunt smiled at the sugar-bowl.

"Not at all. I confess that the same thought had occurred to me. I knew that I should get nowhere by straight questioning; one can't pound that type of witness. I had to try an experiment to find out." He shook his head. "No, George. Saunders is no deep and crafty schemer. I fancy he would be considerably astonished if he heard you attribute any such cunning plots to him. That much I am sure of."

"But why?"

"He let me get his finger-prints," said Gaunt. Lightly he touched the shining little pistol on the table before him. "That was why I gave it to him. I'm sorry, gentlemen; it's only a variation of a very old trick. Your real rogue has an almost fanatical horror of finger-prints above all else, even when he is absolutely positive he left none. He may wear gloves from the beginning of his crime to the end; yet there will always be in his mind, never away from him, the hideous fear that he has left just one of those damning prints behind."

"You mean, then," observed Sir George, "that Saunders's story is true?"

"Oh, no. Not necessarily. I mean only that Saunders is no wary, clever, subtle person to deal with. But I was very definitely interested in the story he told. If he lied, then he told a lie almost as revealing as the truth."

Sir George twiddled the tips of his fat fingers. "I suppose

that's what you call paradox. Rather out of your line, isn't it?"

"It's what I call common sense. I wish I had been able to persuade the Commissioner to see it."

Gaunt had forgotten, or seemed to have forgotten, the business at hand. He seemed in an argumentative mood. His almost invisible gesture brought Wood to the table with a decanter of brandy.

"A few years ago," he continued, striking a match for his pipe, "there was an enormous to-do in police circles about certain alleged scientific devices which were bound to make criminals betray themselves. It started with the Jung word-association test; you read out a list of apparently meaningless words to a suspect, and timed his answers to the word which each one suggested to him. If he were overlong in answering, or unconsciously put in a betraying word in reply to a suggestion, it was supposed to have a highly sinister significance.

"Then we got what was humorously known as the Lie Detector—various forms of it. You fastened various complicated devices to the suspect and watched the antics of his blood-pressure at the mention of pertinent words. There were other ways, even including the use of a drug guaranteed to produce truth, and all were considered solemnly by the rainmakers and medicine-men.

"So far as I know, all forms of ordeal were devised; except, I believe, binding the suspect hand and foot, throwing him into the water, and declaring him innocent if he drowned. As a matter of practical value, the last procedure would have been as useful as any of the others in determining guilt.

"For, witness. The suspect cannot help knowing what is going to happen to him. He is seated with an apparatus fastened to his arm, while various cryptic words are shot at him, and he has a vision of his blood going up like a geyser at the most harmless word. Indeed, the more harmless the word is, the more apt is the patient to be alarmed about it, as having a deadly meaning. If he is at all connected with the case, he knows the facts, is frightened by them, and still more by the facts he doesn't know. And the more innocent he is, the greater is his alarm.

"Because of the Press, it is conceivable that half the people of England are acquainted with the facts in a notorious case. A murder is committed at a bird-fancier's shop in Tottenham Court Road. A peaceful stockbroker from Surbiton, who knows the case only from the newspapers, is haled before the inquisitors. The device is adjusted, the scientist makes mesmeric passes with his notebook, and launches into some such string of words as 'knife, worm, canary, tree, seed, herring.' If the stockbroker is disturbed by the first five words, as he is bound to be, he will break into sweat at the word '*herring*,' which doesn't seem to apply and is therefore probably fatal.

"This, of course, puzzles the inquisitors, because '*herring*' had nothing to do with the matter in the first place. It was there only by the devilish cunning of the psychologists, to put the patient's mind at rest. Whereupon the psychologists will sit down and accumulate bats in their erudite belfries attempting to explain by what devious twists of the human brain this murderer of a bird-fancier broke down at the word '*herring*.' . . . That, gentlemen, is the 'worst of the machine. Whether or not the machine makes a mistake, the operators always do. They can't help it."

Gaunt was sitting back with his eyes half-closed and the smoke in a cloud round his head. Now he sat up and looked about the circle.

"Never put a clinical thermometer into a man's ear and attempt to get the temperature of his brain, you see. Let him alone, utterly and completely. Never encourage him to talk, and browbeat only those who are loquacious to begin with; then they will become more loquacious than ever. If he has prepared an intricate, spacious, well-constructed lie, it may be difficult to trap him. For the questioner, the fortunate point is that so few lies are well-constructed beforehand. They are spur-of-the-moment, and, even if they have been thought about beforehand, the liar cannot resist the temptation to *elaborate*. For example, if you sincerely want to go to dinner with somebody, and circumstances make it impossible, your apologies to that person later are brief and cost you no effort. It is only when you wish heartily to avoid the dinner and miss it deliberately that your apologies take

the form of a lengthy and detailed story. In other words, the betraying detail is the unnecessary detail."

Gaunt poured out a glass of brandy and held it against the light. Sir George leaned forward.

"I never heard you lecture like this without a purpose," he said. "But you mean that the liar trips himself up that way—that is, definitely? With an inconsistency on which you can put your finger?"

"If he does not sometimes go to that extent, as he often does," Gaunt answered, "it is invariably a true picture of his own character. He reveals what is in his mind at most times by the things which spring to it, *without questioning*, on the spur of the moment. . . . That is why," said Gaunt, taking a deep drink, "I rather like congenital liars for my friends. I know what kind of men they really are."

Sir George coughed. "Thanks," he said mildly. "I presume you are leading up to something. Is the lecture inspired by that tale Saunders told us?"

"Oh, no. But Saunders, by the way, showed perfectly what was in his mind at the time he spoke. . . . I am speaking of a much more serious matter. I am speaking of the most perfect combination of the two factors: a lie, or series of them, which not only trap the speaker into an out-and-out absurdity, but indicate his character thoroughly."

He sat up straight as he heard voices in the hall.

"That will be Inspector Tape, I dare say. I had better go and see him."

CHAPTER XV

THE GUN IS FOUND

TAIRLAINE did not want to hear the facts recounted again. He sank back wearily into his chair as Gaunt left the dining-hall, followed by Dr. Manning. They almost bumped into Francis at the door.

"The law," the latter said, jerking his thumb. "Pat will be down shortly. I'll be in here, in case you need me. . . .

Ah, brandy. Excellent. What's been going on in my absence?"

"A lecture," said Sir George, clasping and unclasping his hands moodily. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I," said Massey. "I've been looking back on everything I've said or done—and I've been afraid I've left something out in telling it, or not told it the right way, or told it wrongly the second time, or something—and that old devil has got a twisted notion. . . . My God, I'm *afraid* of the man."

"I say, he seems to have put the wind up you chaps," Francis remarked in a queer voice. "What was he talking about?"

"Lying," said Sir George, "and the way to tell a liar. H'm. I dare say you've had a deal of this, Michael? Tell us about—this morning."

In a dull voice Tairlaine went through the entire recital, from the time he saw the dog dart out on the balcony last night to their discovery of the body. But he had been coached. He did not mention that these facts had any connection with Lord Rayle's rooms. But when he had finished, it was as horrible as though somebody had taken up his unspoken thoughts. Gaunt was apparently conferring with Inspector Tape in the Great Hall, and the inspector's voice had a remarkable carrying power. It boomed into the dining-hall now.

" . . . but this burglar, sir, this man—'ow about the other rooms? Mightn't 'e 'ave been after something in his lordship's rooms?"

"I thought of that, Inspector, and I looked through there. But if he did come in there to steal something, I have no idea what it was. Nothing seems to be out of order in either the bedroom or the dressing-room."

Gaunt's voice, Tairlaine noted, was not so loud as the inspector's, but it could be heard plainly. In fact, the American fancied it might be heard all over the downstairs, and that Gaunt wanted it to be. He was addressing a phantom.

"Nothing out of order. . . ." The inspector's voice hesitated, and Tairlaine imagined Tape shaking his head dourly. "But then it was in a rare mess last night, sir."

"Yes. I couldn't be sure. A big chest had been dragged out from one wall: a heavy Florentine one, three or four feet high—you could see its tracks in the dust."

Was that true? Tairlaine tried to picture the dishevelled bedroom once more. He and Gaunt had prowled about it for some time after Gaunt's discovery of the closet, and the riddles therein. Yes. He remembered now: a carved oaken chest, in the massive style of the mid-seventeenth century, which always reminded him of the bride who hid in such a chest as a joke and was not able to get out again. Why remember it? Ah, yes—it had struck him as odd that in such a grimy place the top of the chest had been almost free of dust. But he could not place its position; everything was thrown about in that room.

Again as though it were eerily taking up his own thoughts, Inspector Tape's voice floated. Everybody in the dining-hall was frankly listening now.

"I know it, sir," the inspector declared with satisfaction. (He would be smugly smiling.) "I saw it last night. Empty, sir. Empty. Anything else?"

"I looked in the safe, of course, and the drawers of the writing-table, and behind all the tapestries, and in the closet." Gaunt's voice sank. It was as admirably controlled as an actor's. If they heard only the words they were designed to hear, these words were curious and disturbing. As Gaunt and the inspector were heard walking towards the staircase, behind them floated:

"Closet . . . robe . . . nothing important . . . figures . . ."

A trap, obviously, but what sort of trap? Gaunt could gain nothing by attempting to entice the murderer into investigating Lord Rayle's closet. It would be no evidence whatever, even if somebody were seen in the act. Tairlaine himself would have liked to go over some of Lord Rayle's possessions, and he did not doubt that perfectly innocent people might be interested in the same act. You might be suspicious of a person you found under such circumstances, but not in a realm of madness could you accuse him of murder. . . . Turning, and trying to look as though he had not heard, the American found all his companions trying to do likewise.

Francis was the easiest of the lot. He poured out a drink,

and at Sir George's frown he held up the glass to him, said, "Slog Tabs!" and took a deep pull. Then he added:

"I don't know what I'm going to do, but I'm jolly well not going up to another what-d'ye-call-it—charnel-house. Irene can have her own back again. I don't think I mourn. As a matter of fact, I shall probably be had up for murdering her. . . . Don't look so shocked, gentlemen; you've been thinking the same thing."

"Nonsense!" said Sir George, reddening.

"They think it was my gun," Francis went on musingly. "I talked to Saunders too, you see. Good old Saunders. He thinks he's protecting me. It's a fact that the gun isn't there—I looked for it myself, just before I came down here. But I'm dashed if I know where it is. Unless Saunders's amorous friend really did drop it in the water when he attempted that most unsatisfactory of all pursuits—cuddling in a rowboat. Only a master could manage it. . . . I say, Kestevan, did *you* ever cuddle in a rowboat?"

Sir George said sharply: "I wish you'd stop ragging him. You're only making yourself more unpleasant to us. Besides, the word 'cuddle' is an abomination——"

"The Cambridge gorge," said Francis, nursing his glass. "Slog Tabs again. Still, I'm interested. I mean, I'm interested in how he takes Irene's death. After all, she was his friend."

Kestevan got up from the breakfast-table. For a long time he had said nothing; he had just sat there quietly looking at the cloth, so that they had almost forgotten him. But somehow he looked a trifle taller and straighter, and much less theatrical.

"No, she wasn't," he said quite calmly. "I hated her like hell."

For the first time he looked Francis in the eye, and then walked out of the room.

"What ho," said Francis, whistling. "The house of perpetual surprises. Almost human features can be discerned on the worm when it turns. I wonder what caused that? When we heard the news this morning, I thought he was what they call a Stricken Man. Future of the cinema shot to blazes, and all that. Then why the tragedy if he hated . . ."

"Possibly," Sir George observed in a low voice, "it may have been relief."

Francis examined his glass. "I should like the worm better," he said, "if I thought that. All the same, you mustn't divert me. I was pointing out that I am logically the cur for Inspector Tape's pound. Everybody knew how I felt about Irene. Besides, I am now the wealthy Lord Rayle, which I shouldn't have been otherwise." He laughed suddenly. "But, seriously, what pleases me is that you're all pretty damn well sure I didn't do it. What?—Thank you." Checking his laughter, he looked at Tairlaine with refreshed interest. "Doctor, another thing obtrudes itself. Your story about the light in the window, and hearing the dog . . . Irene must have been shot just a few minutes before that. When did it happen?"

"That's what I can't be sure of," Tairlaine answered. "I remember that it was exactly one o'clock when we went upstairs. My impression is that I had been in my room for some little time when I noticed the light. But it's difficult to estimate the interval; I shouldn't like to say."

"Well, I was just wondering . . . I know that I was the last one to go to bed in the house—except Mr. Gaunt . . . Inspector Tape and I had quite a conference; I told Wood to go to bed and I let the inspector out myself." Francis perched himself on the edge of the table. He seemed again to be musing. "I saw Mr. Gaunt's light in the library when I started upstairs. Yes; that was later than half-past one. I looked at my watch, I know, and I remember that it was nearer a quarter to two. I was deadly tired. . . . Would the incident of the dog have occurred before that?"

"I think so. A little before that, at least. I'm sure I hadn't been in my room much more than half an hour."

"The reason I ask it . . . All the lights in the portrait gallery were out. They'd been out for a goodish while; it was the last thing Wood did before he turned in. I was carrying a candle when I went upstairs; I think it must have been the only light in the house other than . . .

"Anyhow, I thought I heard somebody moving about in the portrait gallery."

He paused, and Sir George stared. . . .

"It gave me a turn, of course; I wasn't in good shape. I called out. No answer. Then I thought I must have been mistaken. I went round to my room—it's at the extreme rear, you know—and I was as jumpy as a cat. Funk, pure and simple; I nearly shook my candle out. Saunders was waiting up for me there, as usual, with my nightcap. I was dashed glad to see him. I must have been a funny-looking spectacle. I dismissed him immediately; but I'll swear he must have seen something about me which I hadn't noticed. Damn it, it worried me. . . . Because after he left me I heard a knock at the door, and Saunders appeared again with his coat on, and a funny expression on his own face, and he asked me whether I wouldn't like him to make up a bed on the couch in my room and sleep there for the night. . . . I was a bit sharp with him. He just touched his forehead, looked queerer still, and left."

Again the young man stopped, blinking vacantly, as a police-constable entered the dining-hall, saluted, and moved towards the kitchen passage without a word.

"Nerves," Sir George commented, waving his hand. "Nothing more. You've had 'em ever since last night. I tell you, stop brooding. Next thing, you'll be wondering whether you committed these crimes yourself."

Francis nodded. "I do wonder," he said vacantly. "That's what makes it such perfect hell."

After another uncomfortable silence the baronet snorted and began talking rapidly:

"See here, now: let's collect ourselves. Let's get things straight. I started arguing one thing last night, and I mean to continue it. To begin with, even Inspector Tape will take measures to search this house——"

"For the gun?" inquired Francis.

"Well, yes, for the gun, of course. But I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of the bonds and cash the murderer stole. Last night you chaps scouted my theory that those things were stolen purely as a blind. Still, what about Lady Rayle's murder? According to what we've heard, she had a great deal of very valuable jewellery lying about, and none of it was pinched. But for the moment that's neither here nor there. Whatever the murderer's real motive was, he still had to dispose of that stuff somewhere. He must have

known perfectly well he couldn't dispose of those bonds. Still——"

"Well?" Francis prompted.

"Still, I don't think any ordinary frail human being would deliberately destroy ten thousand pounds' worth of valuable security. That is, he wouldn't chuck it in the fire: at least, not straightaway. There would always be that small hope that *some time* he might be able to use it. . . . Hang it, we're all human! Would *you* burn it? You'd think, 'Well, to-morrow, maybe; if I act too rashly, I may lose a bet.' And you could always hide it somewhere. . . ."

"You jolly well wouldn't hide it in your own room, anyway," said Francis. "That would be suicidal."

"Obviously. So you'd hide the bonds and the cash——"

"Why the cash?" asked Massey, wrinkling his forehead. "Nobody knew the numbers of the notes; they couldn't be traced like the bonds."

"I know. But, man, you can't just shove three hundred pounds into an old suit, and then, when Inspector Tape finds it, say casually: 'Oh, just a bit of pocket money.' Not in this case, anyhow. . . . You hide it somewhere else. Now, let's get our wits working. Where do you hide it?"

Francis fingered his moustache. "That would depend on why you had pinched the stuff in the first place. If, of course, your surmise is correct, and the murderer really did steal it as a blind, he might have stowed it away in somebody else's room. If he ever wanted it again, he could pick it up afterwards; and, if a search of the house found it, that would lead suspicion towards the other person. What?"

"I doubt it," said Sir George, shaking his head. "Not a murderer as clever as this one."

"Why not?"

"My dear Frank, consider. Aside from Gaunt, you know, there are some pretty intelligent people in this house. We shouldn't act the way they do in the novels. There is a strong chance that, if the murderer planted that truck in your room you would discover it yourself. And you wouldn't become terrified and conceal it again, like a person in a detective story, or try to plant it on someone else, like a person in a Wodehouse story. Quite to the contrary. You'd announce the fact. . . . And you'd be believed. Do you

imagine that if Gaunt, or God knows, even the inspector, found the money conveniently tucked into my bureau drawer, he'd think for a moment I was the thief? It would be too obvious. It would be too clear a plant. In fact, all they'd be certain of was my innocence, which is why . . ."

Sir George drew down his tufts of eyebrows.

"Now you're growing subtle again," Francis complained moodily. "I say, don't you think you're making too crafty a villain out of this chap? Still, I can see your point."

"Well, gentlemen?" suggested Sir George, glancing about the group. "What would you do?—You, for example, Doctor?"

Tairlaine tried to conjecture some ingenious plot, and all he could think of was a famous axiom of literature; never could he seem to wrench his thoughts away from such a track.

He said: "There's—there's the plan of hiding a thing by putting it in plain sight."

Francis flourished his glass. "Yah!" he cried. "Yah! I was afraid somebody would suggest that. Excuse me, Doctor; but I know that rot. The purloined letter trick. You shove the letter in the letter-rack, and nobody thinks of looking for it there. . . . Quite. I mean to say, I believed that theory myself, until I tried it a couple of times. We used to play all kinds of silly games here; that's how dull it was. Even, so help me!—*Hunt the Slipper*. Well, when I hid the slipper—I tried to be clever, I did. The first time, I wore it on my own foot. The next time, I put it beside several pairs of overshoes in plain sight. It was plain sight, right enough. The *It* took one look, pointed out the slipper, and then regarded me as though he weren't just certain of my sanity. . . . The trouble with that plain-sight-hidden theory is that it won't wash. No matter how clever or how stupid a person is, he always looks in the obvious place first. It's human nature."

"I'm not so sure, though, but what Tairlaine's guess isn't close to the mark, after a fashion. . . . What do *you* think, Mr. Massey?"

The secretary's moon-face moved from side to side. He hunched his shoulders.

"If I'd ever done anything like that," he said slowly, "I

should take the money somewhere, and—and bury it. Ugh."

"Like an ostrich," said Francis. "I know. But that isn't using your head; that's just pure funk. I should be so scared it's probably what I should do myself. . . . But what would Sir George's super-murderer do? That's what we're trying to decide."

"I don't know," Massey admitted. "But there are any number of places here in the castle: chests, desks, old nooks and crannies. I know of at least two desks that have drawers with false bottoms. Besides . . ."

He looked over his shoulder. Patricia Steyne, in a loose black frock which accentuated her pallor, was hesitating at the door; Massey hurried to draw out a chair for her.

Tairlaine thought that she was even lovelier than last night. He liked fragility in women as much as he disliked strong-mindedness; thus had been the tenor of whatever rusty bachelor dreams lay behind him. Looking at the pale beauty and wide eyes of this girl, he felt a warmth of protective kindness. It was unimportant that few thoughts would ever mar the serenity of that forehead; thoughts would only frighten her.

Thus Michael Tairlaine, indulging in a mental handshake with the beaming ghost of Mr. William Wordsworth.

Patricia said in a small voice: "Please—no, thanks, Bruce. No breakfast. I've had coffee. . . . It's horrible, isn't it?"

"Is it?" inquired Francis cheerfully. "What, old woman?"

"Oh, don't try to—to act like that! I've heard. About Irene." She shuddered. "And everything. Mrs. Carter's been up with me since I woke up, and she's just as bad. Irene . . ."

Francis said gently: "My dear, you needn't even be psycho-analysed any more. That's finished for ever. Irene won't scare you again. But we weren't speaking of that. Here, sit down and I'll heat you some coffee anyway." Busying himself with the spirit-lamp under the urn, he continued to babble. "As a matter of fact, we were talking about games. . . ."

"And poor little Doris——!" Patricia cried suddenly.

"Mrs. Carter told me about that too, and how she looked when she was dead, and how the gramophone was playing hymns. . . ."

"She would," said Francis. "Tch-tch—steady! Blast the thing, I can't get it lighted—pass me a cup, will you, Bruce?—so. I say, Pat, forget the old witch. I tell you we were discussing games. One particular favourite of yours, too. Hunt the Slipper."

Patricia regarded him with puzzled eyes, blinking. . . .

"You were always too good at it for the rest of us," Francis continued admiringly. "Sugar and cream?"

"Hunt the Slipper?" she repeated. "But *why* on earth . . . Anyway, you were much the best of us, Frank, when you got the swing of it. You always put the slipper in one of those suits of armour, and nobody could find out which one, because you'd pushed it far in. . . ." She checked herself. They could see that she was thinking of the armour hall, and that all the ugly events were flooding back to twist her face.

"Damn," said Francis. "Never mind the slipper. Take this cup . . . Ah, good. Here's Mr. Gaunt. He wants to talk to you."

Gaunt came in slowly, and he looked unusually grave. When Patricia was introduced to him he shook his head.

"I don't think I shall trouble you, Miss Steyne," he said. "At least, not now. I came down to prepare you . . ."

Francis glanced at him sharply.

"Prepare us?"

"For a great shock. Inspector Tape is doing his duty now. I may mention that he is quite triumphant about it. . . . The gun has been found."

Tairlaine felt a queer constriction round his heart, a sense of roaring in his ears. There was a sharp scraping rasp as Francis shoved his chair back. Gaunt was looking from one to the other of them meditatively.

"It has been found," he went on, "in the pocket of Saunders's coat. If pressed, I think Saunders is prepared to confess to the murder of Lady Rayle."

CHAPTER XVI

A STROLL IN THE PARK

"OH, no," said Gaunt. "He isn't guilty, of course. But it should shed an interesting sidelight on who is."

It was late afternoon now, and the turmoil of that morning, after Gaunt's startling news about Saunders, had left them all unstrung. That whole part of the day, Tairlaine says, was the most hysterical time in his experience. Tairlaine remembered flashes: Saunders sitting woodenly on a chair upstairs, and refusing to answer Inspector Tape's queries; Francis snarling at the inspector in a cold and ugly rage; Sir George puzzled and dubious; everybody doubting Saunders's guilt, but nobody knowing how to attack the stubborn fact.

"You, sir," Saunders had said, lifting dull eyes to Francis, "you keep hout of this, if you please. If they say I done it, then I done it. Eh?"

At the rear of the upper hall, beside Francis's room, there was a closet containing maps, rags, furniture polish, and several pieces of clothing belonging to Saunders. All this was exhibited in a sideshow fashion by Inspector Tape, who pinched his moustaches as he goggled at the evidence. In this closet Saunders kept his greatcoat, which he donned before leaving the castle at night, and several disreputable suits of clothing cast off by his employer.

Inspector Tape, taking much pride in reasoning along the same lines as Gaunt, and achieving a distinct success, went into detail about the discovery of the weapon. He also had questioned Saunders. Not being satisfied by the other's answers, he had dispatched a constable to Saunders's room above the stables. The constable found nothing, and for a moment the good inspector was baffled. But then Wood, the butler, bethought himself of the closet in the upper hall; and the first dive of the inspector's hand into the pocket of an old Norfolk jacket revealed the gun. It was a Webley-Scott service automatic, of the standard forty-five calibre

pattern; it had been recently fired, and three bullets were missing from an otherwise full clip.

Simple and complete, now, was the case to the inspector. He said so.

"Plain as daylight, sir," he told Gaunt. "Mind, I say nothing against 'er dead ladyship. But there's talk in the village—well, she wasn't 'appy, I've 'eard. I thought it was odd last night. I pay attention to servants' talk, sir, and I've found it most 'elpful. . . ."

Tairlaine remembered him distinctly, as he stood with one eye half shut, leaning forward, at the conference they had in the library that morning. Francis was upstairs with Saunders, so the inspector felt at liberty to go on.

"They do say it was 'er ladyship who scared the 'ousemaid with the gauntlets. Well, if 'er ladyship stole the gauntlets, she *had* the gauntlets, didn't she?—"

"All right," said Sir George. "All right. But what has that got to do with Saunders?"

The inspector wore a mysterious smile. "Patience, sir. You'll see. Now, if she 'ad the gauntlets, she probably 'ad the bowstring, and if she 'ad the bowstring, and she were minded to kill 'is lordship——?" Tape lifted a finger portentously, and goggled round.

"You mean: for his money?" Massey asked dubiously.

"She inherited it all; yes, sir. Now, then. *Oo* was upstairs, paying 'er a visit, at just about the time 'is lordship was strangled?—Doris. And 'oo, sir, probably saw her do it? Why, Doris? Eh?"

"So," Sir George said musingly, "you think Lady Rayle killed him. H'm. I'd thought of that, too. But had she strength . . . ?"

"If you've noticed 'er 'ands, sir, you won't have little doubt of that. She could 'ave done it, easily. I think she did do it. Now, then. Again taking servants' gossip, for which I'm sure you'll excuse me"—he glanced round, to be sure Francis was absent—"it's no secret 'ow Mr. Fran . . . 'ow Lord Rayle felt about Doris. *And* it's no secret that Saunders would cut off 'is right 'and, if Mr. Francis demanded it. Faithful, sir. Faithful's the word. 'E knew 'ow Mr. Francis felt about the girl's death; and Saunders has killed men before, in the way of duty."

Sir George scratched his chin. "That's rather a neat way of putting it, Inspector," he observed. "But aren't you giving Saunders credit for a great deal of penetration? How did he know Lady Rayle had killed the girl?—Even *you* didn't, you know."

"I'm not so sure," said Massey. "It was pretty obvious what Frank thought about it. I'm almost certain he believed Lady Rayle was guilty; and that would be all Saunders needed. . . . Besides, Saunders was here in the room last night when Frank burst out with that story of Doris being frightened by the gauntlets. Yes, Saunders may have taken his cue. And yet——"

He paused uncomfortably. Even in full daylight the library was gloomy; the sun through window-glass stained the floor in murky colours, and beyond one window they could see the shimmer of the waterfall.

"And yet—what?" Gaunt prompted. He was leaning against the fireplace, a black-letter book in his hands. "What, Mr. Massey?"

"Well . . . it seems such a damned silly thing to do," the secretary answered doggedly. "I grant you Saunders isn't over-bright. But if he'd killed Lady Rayle, would he just take the gun and shove it into the pocket of his own coat, in the place it would be certain to be found by the first person who looked? It seems to me we were talking about just this sort of thing to-day, and you all seemed to think we shouldn't be suspicious of a man on whom such a damning piece of evidence was found. . . . I mean to say," Massey concluded, rather embarrassed at making such a long speech, "I mean to say, Saunders may be stupid. But he isn't stark mad."

"We're in the morass again, though," Sir George returned. "We don't know what Saunders is really like. But it reminds me—if what Mr. Gaunt says is correct, about the criminal's terror of finger-prints, would he have let his finger-prints be taken so easily as when John gave him that little pin? What about prints on the Webley-Scott, by the way?"

Inspector Tape's red moustache beamed. He tapped his notebook.

"Quite so," he agreed. "You do right, sir, to ask about

that. Well, I'm a bit inexperienced, as you might say, but I know 'ow to handle the powder; part of my training. His finger-prints were on the gun, right as rain. And there you are. Now, if you gentlemen will look after Saunders while I go to Aldbridge for a warrant . . ."

Gaunt closed the black-letter book, over which he had been knitting his brows for some time. He looked up vaguely. He even put the eyeglass into his eye, the better to observe Inspector Tape, and he seemed—in an abstracted manner—distressed.

"Oh, I say, Inspector," he remarked. "You don't really mean to arrest Saunders, do you?"

Tape frowned. "Well, sir—yes, I do. After all, you gentlemen are scholars, and all that; and you talk about being subtle, and so on. . . . But I confess, gentlemen, I don't believe in this subtle thing. Saunders isn't like that. 'E wouldn't do no such thing. I doubt 'e knows what finger-prints are. Just straight out, Saunders is. No hesitation about handling the little gun—as you say—or in shooting the big one, because 'e didn't know finger-prints would give 'im away. "There."

Gaunt sat down in a tall chair and stretched his long legs.

"That's what I'm curious about, Inspector," he said. "Do what you like, of course; you're in charge. But may I ask you to tell me just what you think happened in Lady Rayle's room? How did Saunders go about his work?"

"Go about his work, sir?"

"We can pass over the uncompleted part of your case, Inspector," Gaunt continued, waving his hands drowsily. "Since Lady Rayle is dead, she can't embarrass you by demanding explanations, as she would have a right to do if she were alive. When you accuse a woman of murder, she may very possibly inquire how she walked through a wall four feet thick. In other words, if you accuse a man in London of killing a man in New York by shooting an arrow across the Atlantic Ocean, you must produce a plausible explanation of how he was able to do it, or I fear no jury would believe you. However, Lady Rayle is dead. She won't bother you with that little difficulty, so neither shall I. All I want to know is your version of Saunders's conduct."

The inspector digested this.

"That shouldn't be 'ard, sir. Since he's willing to admit it. . . . Well, he got the Webley-Scott out of Mr. Francis's room; that would be simple. The 'ouse had gone to bed, and if anybody saw him walking about he could say he was on his way to bed." Tape paused, projecting his imagination. "Well. 'E saw the light in 'er ladyship's bedroom, so he sneaked into the sitting-room. The dog heard him before 'e'd made up his mind what to do. 'Er ladyship got up, put on a robe and took a gun, and came towards the sitting-room. Then 'e saw she meant business; 'e got panicky, and as he came in 'e shot 'er three times at short range. The dog was barking. 'E picked up her body in the doorway and threw it across that long chair-thing; 'e ran after the dog, which was trying to get out by way of the bedroom door to the balcony. So—'e grabs the dog, strangles it, and closes the door. Then 'e goes back to see if everything is all right. 'E must have picked up the little gun and put it on the long chair, because she wasn't holding it. Anyhow . . ." The inspector swept out a massive hand. "That may not be *exactly* it, sir, but——?"

"No," said Gaunt, "no. I'm afraid it isn't."

"Well, sir, if you can give any reason——"

"I can give you several. But, since you don't know them, I'll merely examine your own recital. The sitting-room window was open, wasn't it?"

Tape reflected, looking suspicious. He consulted his notebook.

"Yes, sir. But——"

"Precisely. Now, Dr. Tairlaine, sitting at his own window, distinctly heard that little dog bark on the balcony. But, with the sitting-room window open, he did not hear three shots fired from a heavy automatic. . . . The doctor may have trouble with his eyes, but I fancy there is nothing wrong with his ears."

The inspector stared. "All very good, sir," he said grimly. "Maybe she wasn't shot in that room, anyway. It's got nothing to do with Saunders's guilt. Maybe—as I myself suggested—Saunders was in 'is lordship's room. . . ."

"That would make your case worse yet, in regard to my next point," said Gaunt, shaking his head. "But take it at your own recital. If Saunders behaved as you said, In-

spector, he made his presence well marked. He handled three doors, a chaise-longue, a small pistol, and God knows what else. . . . You searched those rooms rather thoroughly for finger-prints, I think." Gaunt opened his eyes suddenly. "Did you find any?"

There was a long silence.

Gaunt went on placidly: "You see, Inspector, here is an utter dolt who knows nothing of finger-prints. He cares so little for marks that he leaves his own prints on the weapon with which he committed the crime, and carelessly handles the weapon I gave him later. What does he care for finger-prints? . . . Yet, in the room of the crime, he leaves no prints whatever on all the things he must have handled. . . . I say, Inspector; it won't wash, you know."

The inspector turned and stared uncertainly out into the sunshine.

"And, if you want further reasons," continued Gaunt, "I can only say that if you'll go upstairs with me I can demonstrate that you're wrong. If I were you, I shouldn't order Saunders's arrest. It should be fairly obvious what he is doing."

"Hold on a bit!" cried Sir George. "I can see it now. What Frank told us just this morning . . ."

"He told you something this morning?"

"Yes. You and the inspector were upstairs. . . . He said that Saunders was waiting for him in his room last night when he went upstairs. He told Saunders to go. Saunders went out, and a moment later he reappeared in the door, *with his overcoat on*, and—what did Frank say—'a funny-looking expression' on his face. And Saunders was naturally worried. He had taken his overcoat out of the closet . . ." Sir George paused, staring at Gaunt.

The latter nodded. "Yes. And he had found a newly fired automatic in the pocket of his own coat."

"I see," Massey remarked slowly. "But why didn't he chuck the thing away? Why didn't he dispose of it that night, as he told us in that cock-and-bull story this morning?—Why just shift it to the pocket of another coat?"

Sir George had begun to pace about heavily. He turned with a testy scowl.

"That's easy. He didn't know a crime had been committed then. It only burst over him this morning when we began our questioning, and he blurted out the first tale that occurred to him. . . . *He* thought Frank Steyne wanted him to assume the blame."

In the dour old room, with dust-motes floating against the light, Tairlaine found his own voice speaking.

"Perhaps," said Tairlaine, "he did."

. . . The American could remember this now, in the late afternoon, as he and Gaunt paced the front courtyard of the castle. A still, hazy September day, with a mellow sky above the towers, and the fragrance of the woods in the sea-breeze. Some sort of conference had gone on between Gaunt and Inspector Tape; Tairlaine was not present, but he remarked that the inspector was visibly disturbed when he left the library. Most of the occupants of the castle were asleep. There had been little enough sleep for them the night before; and now the bedrooms were dark with a stupor of terror and exhaustion. Shadows had begun to creep down the ivy of the façade, but the windows were bright and warm. . . . Gaunt, knocking his knuckles against the blackened stone urns of the terrace as he paced, had been silent for some time.

At length he said: "Young Francis Steyne has promised to join us for a stroll in the park. I shall want to talk to him—very seriously."

"About Saunders?" Tairlaine inquired absently as he watched the grey pigeons fluttering and falling round a sundial in the court, and the quick darts of sparrows underneath.

"Among other things. Games, for instance. They seem addicted to games here at Bowstring."

It was hard for Tairlaine to realise that he had been at Bowstring only one day. But it seemed to him now that almost his first words with an occupant of the castle had been a mention of children's games. The wind and the sea-noise, the rattle of the trap and Francis flourishing his whip in the twilight; Sir George bundled up in loud clothes, and the memory of Francis's voice: 'He's always a bright influence, the bart. I mean to say—games. He teaches us games. You put out the lights and yell, or something.'

Watching the pigeons now, Tairlaine had an absurd desire to laugh.

"Yes," he said. "Games. You put out the lights and yell, or something."

Gaunt turned sharply. His eyes were not dull now. He said:

"Why do you say that?"

"Sorry. It was some remark Francis made yesterday; nothing important."

"Elijah!" said Gaunt, chewing his pipe. "'Prophet,' said I, 'prophet evil; prophet still, if bird or devil——' Excuse me, Doctor; I don't like this. In any event, here's our prophet."

Francis came glumly out on the terrace. He blinked as he saw Gaunt.

"Look here," he began; "look here . . ." And then it was some time before he could go on. "I'm no good at thanking people, Mr. Gaunt. But if you want the whole damned castle, take it. Inspector Tape was convinced—the ignorant, blundering ass!—that Saunders . . . you know? I don't know how you convinced him otherwise, but—I mean to say, thanks. There; I've got it off my chest." He drew a long breath. "I knew it was a plant, of course. The murderer slipped that gun into Saunders's pocket, and Saunders was being a stout fella. But why *Saunders*? Why, of all the people in the house, pick on him?"

"If you don't mind showing us round the park," Gaunt answered, "I think I can show you. Where shall we go?"

"There's the King's Pool; we generally show visitors that. Some soldiers in the royalist army were supposed to have hidden there during the Cromwellian wars. They say the main body of Roundheads surprised 'em, and there was a sword-fight, and the royalists were butchered and thrown in. . . . The villagers claim that the stains you see in the water, sometimes, are blood. It's as good a place as any. I want to know what's on your mind. Here, help me shove these gates open."

A path twisted down through oaks and chestnuts in the unkempt park; Tairlaine breathed gratefully the moist, earth-smelling air. Over a spur of the headland they could just see the glitter of the grey sea; and this greyness tinged

the brown and sleepy park. Somebody was burning leaves. For a time nobody spoke.

"Carry on," Francis said gruffly. "I know you don't want to be overheard, but we're safe enough now. . . . Hear the birds in that brush? What did you want?"

He turned sharply, his back against a tree, and Tairlaine thought he looked pale. "If you're here to accuse me——?"

Gaunt was carrying a heavy ash stick, with which he poked negligently at the dead leaves. Taking the pipe out of his mouth, he shook his head.

"No. Not to accuse you. But—you wanted to know why the murderer picked on Saunders, I think."

"Yes. He certainly didn't believe he could fasten the crime on Saunders; that was a piece of bungling."

"It was no bungling, Mr. Steyne. It was a very deadly part of his scheme." The woodland was full of mysterious whisperings; Gaunt seemed to be listening to them, and paying no attention to the young man backed against the trunk of the tree. "Almost from the first, there has been a very definite design, and this latest development was a part of it—even though it may have been an afterthought. That is how I hope to catch the murderer. The murderer hid that gun in Saunders's coat so that suspicion should fall on *you*. The whole object of the murderer's plot has been to fasten suspicion on you. Had you realised it?"

CHAPTER XVII

A CLOCK STOPS

"I THINK you have realised it," Gaunt continued, after a moment. He lowered his head and looked Francis in the eyes. "It has worried you terribly, hasn't it?"

There was a nakedness about Francis's gaze which to Tairlaine's uncomfortable mind seemed almost indecent. He could never pry into other people's hearts; it would be like rifling their belongings. Francis stood slightly crouched,

his leather-gloved hands flat back against the bole of the tree, and his mouth shook. He looked old and ugly.

"Yes," he replied in a low voice. "And even worse was—was being afraid that I might really be guilty."

The gurgling splash of the waterfall, the waters hissing in the moat, and under it the muttered bass note of the surf. A petulant rook cawed homeward towards sunset. All the dry leaves shook and whispered and it was as though Francis's movements and even his voice hung as dry-brittle as the foliage.

"Of all things in the world," said Gaunt, "you detest self-consciousness most, and yet of all people in the world you are one of the most self-conscious. That is the real reason why you so dislike Mr. Kestevan, and want to unnerve him; he seems too unmoved and self-assured. . . . You find in yourself no beef-and-ale stolidity. Look there." He swept his arm towards the towered staunchness of Bowstring. "You wish you could be like that—oak-staff and war-flag. And you knew you were not."

Francis followed the direction of his hand dumbly. "I knew I was a failure," he said, after a pause. "I only hoped I wasn't a mur——"

"And that was also," Gaunt went on quietly, "why you hated Lady Rayle, with her analyses of herself and other people. You were always afraid of what you might find in your own heart. You twisted everything to the image of what you were afraid to see." Gaunt did not raise his voice, but there was a sort of pitying, repressed fury in his words. "You have imagination, and sympathy, and insight; you have the stuff great things are made of, and you think it's weakness. Man, man, have done with this ghastly nonsense before you ruin your life."

Francis was staring at him curiously.

"Then," he muttered, "you saw how things were happening. . . ."

"I know how a certain person aped your own imagination in planning this crime. You saw it yourself, with a sort of horror, as though you yourself had been planning it. . . . You fostered it yourself, in your weakness, by always insisting that you were slightly mad. Then a father who stands in

your way is murdered; round his neck was tied a bowstring which *you* above all people were aware was new, and not likely to break—which was associated with you, and a sort of symbol of his domination.”

Gaunt hesitated. His old, sombre eyes were veiled. “At the same time—forgive me—a girl is discovered with child, and the whole castle knows you loved Doris Mundo. Doris Mundo dies. It is as though your Hyde nature had taken leave of its Jekyll altogether. I am cutting deep. Believe me, sir, it will do you good; you have thought of the same things yourself.

“Finally, the one person in the house whom you genuinely hate, and who stands between you and complete mastery, is shot. Lady Rayle is shot with your automatic, the only one of its kind in the castle. . . . And now do you see why it was sheer brilliant subtlety that the murderer planted this gun in Saunders’s coat?

“The murderer has reasoned thus: It will be obvious that the weapon belongs to you. But this murderer is not dealing with the wits of the country police, as represented by Inspector Tape; he is dealing with several brains as nimble as his own; and, whatever else he may know, he knows that John Gaunt is not a fool. Therefore it would never do to plant this obvious weapon in an obvious place: hidden in your room, for example. Only a stupid man would do that. Nor would it be effective if the weapon were thrown down a well—a missing gun would not necessarily point definitely towards *you*. The third course, to conceal it in the room of a guest, would be impractical. I have spoken with Sir George, who tells me you discussed this subject; an innocent man would probably come across the pistol, especially since we have been warned to watch out, produce the gun, and be believed.

“But *Saunders’s* coat; the coat of the devoted servant! Who but *you* would think of hiding it there? He would never give you away. And, when it is found—as the murderer meant it to be—nobody is suspicious of Saunders. Inevitably people become suspicious of you. It is the final move in a shrewd and subtle brain.”

The eastern sea was turning purple with sunset. Francis turned his head to look at it for a moment, and his shoulders

were tense. When he turned back again his face was calm with a sort of detached interest.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks again. Mr. Gaunt. You see—I had no alibis at all."

"That was luck, of course. I don't mean that the murderer had plotted this all out beforehand, to hang you for a deliberate crime. No, no. I think I can prove otherwise. But when circumstances forced murder, he was compelled to use you as the scapegoat. He planned as he went along, and luck helped him. . . . You had, as you say, no alibi. He couldn't bargain on that. But he used his advantages admirably."

"And now——?"

"I am inclined to believe he has gone too far. Games, sir. To-night we shall play games. You turn out the lights and yell, or something."

Francis pulled down his hat on his eyebrows. "We seem to have been talking about games all day, Mr. Gaunt. Turn out the . . . I say," he peered across with squinted eyes, "what sort of games? You don't mean that Murder thing, do you?"

"I believe this particular game is called Hunt the Slipper," said Gaunt. "If my idea is correct, the murderer will have particular reason to hunt the slipper to-night. . . . Let's have a look at the King's Pool before sundown."

He turned about, slashing at the underbrush with his stick, and sauntered down the path.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Francis said, "but, oh, Lord, I feel better!" He gave a fillip to his hat, and his walk was almost jaunty. "Turn to the right there, Mr. Gaunt. It's just ahead. Look here, do you really mean we shall have a chance at the murderer to-night?"

"Yes—with your assistance." Gaunt hesitated. "I have rather an elaborate plan. It may not succeed. But it is the only certain way. If this whole plot had not been directed towards you, I am not certain I should have known how to proceed."

They emerged into a cleared space on a slope, and stood for a moment silent. A still pool lay among the beech trees. On the rolling hills towards the west, stunted sycamores were

enmeshed in silhouette with the sunset, and faint gleams lay without a ripple among the reeds. Gaunt stopped beside the rustic bridge, a thin silhouette above the pale-lit water; Tairlaine could see his moustache and tuft of whisker, his rakish slouch hat, and his billowing cloak. With the darkling sea to the westward, he was a royalist figure out of the Cromwellian wars—breastplate and scarlet ribbon, beside the haunted pool where the slain cavaliers lay. All the history of Bowstring gathered round him on the windy height, and whispered. In the last red tinge of sundown, Francis tossed a stone into the pool. As the ripples widened from the splash, they were curled and crooked with a reddish colour now. . . .

Francis said: "Then you know who the person is?"

"I will give you your instructions presently," Gaunt said, as though he had not heard. "Inspector Tape has his, and we shall co-operate. If we fail, no harm is done. But I warn you"—he turned from staring at the water, and looked at them—"I warn you to be prepared for a surprise. This man is a killer whom you would never under heaven suspect as a killer. I question whether he realised his own potentialities, until he was driven to it." But I know that I have got him worried; and we must be a trifle theatrical in order to catch him. . . . Inspector Tape's men have been on guard all day; if you follow my advice, we should have him before midnight. . . . Excuse me, gentlemen. I wonder if you would indulge a vagary of mine and let me stay here alone for a little while?"

He touched his stick against the rail of the bridge, and he seemed to be listening to the wind.

"Of course, sir," said Francis. He turned irresolutely. "But there is just one thing—what is there that remains to be done?"

"For me," said Gaunt, "there remains only to look round the armour hall."

They turned back up the slope and left him there, leaning on his stick, with his head bowed. And the sea melted purple into the purple of dusk, and lights winked on in the tall castle; and once, when Tairlaine glanced back, he saw Gaunt staring at the margin of the pool,

where the faint ripples still quivered with the dull colour of blood.

The whole castle was so quiet that Tairlaine distinctly heard the moon-faced clock in the library tinkle out the hour of eleven—cheerful, unhurried, and unperturbed.

And Tairlaine thought: This situation is tolerably ridiculous. It is, of course, fantastic that a respectable professor of English at Harvard University should be entangled, to begin with, in any such unnerving business as a murder case. But more fantastic is the conduct of a professor who indulges in such antics as now occupy me. At ten minutes to eleven he rises from his warm bed—wherein he has been ensconced less than half an hour—and puts on dressing-gown and slippers. Whereupon, without striking any light, he opens his bedroom door and edges stealthily into a corridor peculiarly adapted to inducing rheumatism of the joints. Still without any illumination except the doubtful light provided by the moon through windows or the glow of fires not yet extinguished, he must grope his way downstairs. He has only a hazy idea of the plan of this castle. But he must go down the great staircase, creep through the Great Hall, down the corridor to the armour room through the library. Once in the armour hall, he must mount to the balcony along the side, flatten himself in a corner, and await developments. On such an adventure, absurd rather than romantic, it is advisable to wear a heavy sweater and two pairs of wool socks. Be it said to the credit of the romance in Tairlaine's wintry soul, that he completely forgot to wear both.

He did not chuckle as he went downstairs. He did not think of what his confrères at Cambridge would have said had they seen him sneak through the Great Hall like a child playing pirate, straining weak eyes and tapping sometimes at his greyish spike of a beard. He thought only of Gaunt's instructions. Before the beginning of this adventure, it is true, he had made certain plans. He would take his temperature with a clinical thermometer, and carefully note down any symptoms in nerves or muscular reactions; later he would have the material for a paper describing how one really felt under such circumstances, as contrasted with the

descriptions in classic literature. But when the time came he did nothing of the kind.

Cold draughts belled out his nightshirt. In the cavern darkness of the Great Hall, three red-smouldering heaps showed banked fires, and made streaky shadows round the hearths. The household had retired early that night, stepping softly in the presence of the undertaker; to-morrow the tenantry would come formally to view the bodies, and the next day Lord and Lady Rayle would be committed to the family burying-ground near the sea. Their presence was very real now, because they lay embalmed in the music-room, ready to be wheeled out for inspection on the morrow. As Tairlaine passed the door of the music-room, he smelled flowers.

It was the first real pang of terror which had struck him. In the darkness he steadied himself against the wall, a chilly moisture creeping out on his body, and his heart knocking wildly. He felt absolutely alone. Or did he? Somewhere, it seemed to him, there was movement. Gaunt had given him his instructions privately, after dinner; what Gaunt had told any of the others he did not know. If this were a game of Hunt the Slipper, it had an unseen and deadly edge, as suggestive as the motionless suits of armour among which he must venture. Tairlaine dabbed the sleeve of his dressing-gown across his forehead. He thought that the smell of flowers had grown stronger . . .

Then the German clock in the library tinkled out its first note, and went on leisurely striking eleven. For some reason this steadied him. The clock was an old friend, with an honest, dependable moon-face; many times he had found himself thinking of it. It was a symbol of solidity in this gauntlet-haunted house. When Tairlaine crept into the dark library it had hardly finished striking; he kept to the wall until he found its tall walnut case, and pressed his hand against it as though for reassurance.

Here the tumult of the waterfall was very loud. A breeze blew through the room from an open window, and Tairlaine shivered. Groping past the clock, he found that the armour-hall door was slightly ajar.

To this day he wonders at his courage. He could never do it again. It was, he says, almost a blind desire to stumble

forward in spite of the terrors, lest his return upstairs be more full of danger than what lay ahead. A nerve in his knee jerked uncontrollably, and his legs felt very light, though it seemed to him that his hands were steady. He slid through the armour-hall door into absolute darkness, chilling and full of the odour of steel plates on leather. Here the waterfall noise was almost a roar, so that he knew he need not be afraid of any noise. But he did not want to touch even the glass cases containing those figures.

Moving an inch at a time, feeling his way with the utmost care, he could feel his body twitch sometimes in spite of himself. It was like being lost in a maze, and the terrors multiplied. When at length he bumped his shank painfully on the iron stair to the balcony, he gripped the cold railing in a fierce silence of relief. Only to be *above* these figures, he thought, up on that small and insecure balcony, was almost as good as being entirely away from them. When he mounted the stairs, he wondered whether or not he should be making footprints in the dust; still, Gaunt had ordered it, and, besides, a dozen people had blurred that balcony with cross-tracks since last night. He found the wall where the windows were, and crouched in the corner of the balcony. Some distance to his right was the first of the windows, elevated to the same height as the balcony rail, as his groping had discovered. He pressed back into the corner. . . .

Minutes? Hours? He had no idea. He knew that time had ceased; that for an endless time he had been jammed with cramped and freezing bones against a cold wall; that his legs were (unaccountably) growing so shaky he feared he might pitch forward bodily over the balcony rail. He wished for a coat. He wished for tobacco. Above all, he wished for a deep drink of whisky to fight this inner shuddering. The noise of the waterfall grew in his ears to a sound like Niagara. The darkness, weaving and breaking like whirls of foam on water as he strained his bad eyes, had become full of horrible phantoms. And he had again a feeling of movement in the room.

A creak . . .

Tairlaine almost jumped out of a crawling skin. The

noise was so faint that, had it not been for the fact that it was only a few feet away from him, he would not have heard it at all. As it was, his heart turned over in a sick lurch. That sound had come from the window nearest him: from the window opening on Lord Rayle's bedroom.

He tried to stare through the darkness, but he could see nothing. Then there was a light; a brief beam from an electric torch, but clear enough for even his dazzled eyes to see what went on.

Somebody had unlocked this window from the inside, and it was slowly opening inward, on its hinges like a door. From three or four feet off the floor, its coloured mosaic glass gleamed suddenly in the light; then the hand-lamp was switched off. Tairlaine had an impression that a figure had peered out, but he could not be sure.

Silence. Silence, for dragging minutes under the roar of the waterfall. Tairlaine felt it was impossible to endure any longer this ghastly and stifling weight. He put out his hand to the balcony rail so that he should not topple over; his heart was a swinging drum. As certain as he was that nobody had crawled out that window, still . . .

He forced himself forward. Any moment he feared to encounter that light but he drove his non-existent legs in the direction of the window. He touched it, and drew back with a jerk; but he saw the light again.

The man with the flash-lamp was moving about in Lord Rayle's room, soundlessly. Tairlaine forced himself to look in. . . .

The man, whoever he was, was rummaging in the closet there. His back was to the window, and in the uncertain flicker and dart of the light Tairlaine could gain no idea of his height or build. But he had drawn one of the white robes from the closet, and was feeling in the pocket of it. There were no sounds uttered, but he gave a jerk which might have been relief or triumph; he smoothed out a piece of paper and examined it by his light. Then he hung up the robe again, and switched off the torch. But, just before it was extinguished, he moved towards the window.

Tairlaine moved by pure instinct. If this intruder were

coming out on the balcony, he was probably going down into the armour hall. And if Tairlaine were wedged there at the head of the stairs . . . The American stumbled back in the other direction, just as he heard the window creak again. There was a flicker of light out over the armour hall, very brief. Tairlaine saw the banisters, the shine of the gold-powdered armoured figure below, and one or two battle flags. He did not hear the other man climb out of the window, but he saw the beam of his lamp again as the intruder moved down the balcony towards the staircase—a yellow splash bobbing along the floor.

Reaching the floor below, this luminous circle came up. It played across the hall, and swung over the glass cases of armour near the door. On one of these it held steady. Tairlaine gripped the balcony rail; he could not have spoken under torture. . . . There! The glass door to one of the compartments was being unlatched; it was not far from the hall-door, and near a case of daggers. Shimmering in broken reflections, the light moved inside the case. It danced over a suit of what is called half-armour, of the middle seventeenth century, extending not far below the waist in steel skirts called vambraces; but the figure wore scarlet trousers, and the heavy square-toed boots of the New Model army. Then the light fixed itself on the helmet. . . .

The man was crawling inside the case, stooping. In the distorted light he looked like a monstrous and horrible insect. His light probed into the maw of the *siege-burganet* helmet, and it was horribly as though the mouth gaped to receive his hand when he thrust it inside. . . .

“*Grab him!*”

The boom and echo of that yell took Tairlaine like a blow across the back of the neck. He gagged, and fell back against the wall, just as the armour hall jumped into a blaze of light. Still the cry was echoing through the room; Tairlaine's swimming eyes saw in a blurred mist that the hall was full of figures closing in on the glass case. Then Tairlaine found himself running towards the stairway. The immense insect inside the glass case only peered a moment, and then acted. It dropped some sort of bundle it was carrying, and plunged out of the glass door. . . .

"Watch him!" Was that Inspector Tape's voice?
"Watch him! He's going for——"

There was a crash. Tripping, stumbling, his head on fire, Tairlaine fell somehow down the iron stairway, and at the crash he peered up. The unknown intruder had dashed his fist through the glass of a case of daggers. The fist came out bloody, but with a dirk swinging there. Running low, the intruder darted for the big door to the library. A blue-coated constable lurched for him, but they were all still dazed by the suddenness of the lights. The door banged. Tairlaine found himself in the middle of a running press of figures as it was wrenched open again. Then he became conscious that Francis was at his elbow, and that Francis had a heavy automatic pistol in his hand; above all, that Francis was first through the door as it was torn open after the flying intruder.

"Get back!" a voice screamed from the library. The lights had blazed up in there, and the intruder was caught again, like a banging and wheeling insect—peering wildly. Tairlaine saw him just beside the tall German clock. *"Get back!"* he screamed again. *"Get back, or——"*

His hand whipped back, holding the dirk by its point, and blood from his own hand splashed across his face. Above his head, with a ghastly and cheerful calmness, the German clock commenced to strike midnight. . . .

The intruder screamed again, and then his hand whipped forward. Tairlaine heard the dirk's point thud into the door above their heads one instant before he heard the crash of the forty-five. It caught the intruder in the chest, and flung him against the clock-case. They saw flailing arms; then man and clock toppled outwards. They seemed to roll like wrestlers as they struck the floor in a jarring whir and crash. . . .

Above that failing din Tairlaine heard Francis cry:

"Got the swine! Got him! . . . Here, damn you, take another bullet! And another!—So it's Bruce Massey, after all! He's the murderer. There he is. . . . Damn you, here's another shot!"

Horribly, the fallen clock was still striking. But it gave a sigh, a whir among its moon-face weights, and was still.

CHAPTER XVIII

GAUNT EXPLAINS

"I WONDER," said Gaunt, "if you realise even now the nature of this man Bruce Massey."

It was not quite dawn. They had built an enormous fire in the library, from which had been removed now the shattered moon-faced clock and the shattered moon-faced man with five bullets in his body. The hardest man to pacify had been Inspector Tape, who was not so much wrathful as profoundly shocked at Francis for taking the law into his own hands. He insisted that Francis would have to go before a jury to be duly exonerated as having acted in self-defence. "And a lucky thing it was," said the inspector, "that he chucked that knife at you first."

Gaunt sat before the roaring blaze at his ease. He was still in evening clothes, with a full bottle of brandy beside him and a pipe drawing well in his mouth. After the first turmoil had quieted, everybody was excluded from the room except the inspector, Francis, Tairlaine, and Sir George. They sat huddled in dressing-gowns, watching the cold hints of daybreak beyond the windows; and in the quiet they could hear the heavy footfalls of a police constable pacing the flags of the Great Hall.

"I don't understand anything," said Francis dully. "I don't see how you trapped him, or worked out the game. Particularly, I don't see how he could possibly have killed my old man. From the first, he and Dr. Tairlaine were the only people I was sure were innocent. . . . I'm only sure the swine's dead."

Gaunt took a large drink. "Perhaps," he said drowsily, "it would be better to show you that as I tell the story. Let me tell it from my own angle; that is, just as I saw it when I arrived here, and work it out from that point."

Thoughtfully he took from the floor a canvas-covered bundle. It was the bundle which had been concealed inside the helmet of the suit of armour; it contained ten bearer-

bonds of a thousand pounds each, and bank-notes to the amount of four hundred and sixty pounds. Gaunt weighed it in his hand a moment before he put it down again.

"When I first heard the story from Dr. Tairlaine—and a remarkably lucid story it was," he went on, smoking in slow puffs,—“I became certain that one person was lying: Mr. Massey. That he had definitely committed the two murders, Lord Rayle's and Doris Mundo's, I was not, of course, sure at that time. It seemed likely, but I had to go further. Let me show you.

"Now, Mr. Massey, according to his own testimony, left your group shortly after dinner. He said that he went upstairs to the office, where he typed out some letters. He finished at nine-thirty, he said, and saw nothing suspicious; then he came downstairs *directly* to find Lord Rayle. He entered the armour hall, unseen by Dr. Tairlaine; he glanced about, called out, and was about to leave when Lord Rayle entered and brushed past him in a fearful rage. And that Lord Rayle, in passing, said something like, 'They've stolen the pearls.' I heard him tell all this myself, later.

"At first glance, it seems plausible. There was the office ransacked; the safe had been robbed, the cash-box rifled in the desk, books were overturned, and the velvet case formerly containing the pearls lay conspicuously in the centre of the floor. It is extremely plausible that Dr. Tairlaine, half asleep in the chair, did not see him enter the armour hall; anyway, he *was* inside, for he came out.

"But look again. At nine-thirty (he was positive) Massey left the office. He came straight downstairs, went to the armour hall, took a brief look inside, and met Lord Rayle coming out. This was—we know it by Dr. Tairlaine's testimony, because he was watching the clock—not more than a few minutes past nine-thirty: two or three. *In the space of two or three minutes, then, if we believe Massey, all this must have gone on:*

"The alleged burglar has to go into the office after Massey's departure; he has to search the safe, open both the lock of the desk, abstract the case from the box, hide the pearls—which are later found in Doris's hand—and throw

the pearl-case on the floor. *After he has got away*, Lord Rayle has to come into the office himself, discover his loss, examine the room, hurry downstairs, and meet Massey at the armour-hall door just two or three minutes after Massey's own departure from the office.

"Gentlemen, in that time it isn't physically possible. We will say nothing of the improbabilities and absurdities in behaviour here. A man, on discovering he has been robbed, doesn't immediately quit the room and dash downstairs to a dark armour hall on some fantastic errand; he examines the room, he sets up an outcry, he summons somebody at the very least. But examine this fact . . ."

Gaunt's pipe had gone out; he lit it again, his brow wrinkled, and went on:

"The locked desk and cash-box were not forced; they were opened with keys. We consider this natural, because Lord Rayle's keys—which he keeps always about him—are missing from his murdered body. Well, by all the evidence, we know that the robbery must have occurred *before* the murder. . . . Granted?" he asked leisurely.

"Granted," Sir George growled. "Carry on."

"Then how did the murderer get the keys? You can't knock down a man, take his cherished possessions, and coolly rob his safe—all the while that your victim doesn't alarm the household, but gets away from you and goes running through the house muttering to himself and not trying to stop you. There is one flaw. Then, again, suppose that the murderer had a set of duplicate keys, and Lord Rayle had his own keys on his person when he came downstairs. . . . *Why*, in God's name, should the murderer steal these keys after Lord Rayle was dead?"

"That's fair enough," said Francis; "I never thought—those keys——"

"All these things stood out as glaring falsehoods, and they all hinged on Massey's story. I examined the evidence further.

"To what deduction those facts led me I shall indicate in a moment. But in Dr. Tairlaine's statement I was teased by a curious fact: that *click* he heard before the murder. He was not sure just when he heard it, but the time seemed fairly obvious. It could have been caused by nothing in

this library, down there in the direction of the door—look for yourselves. Therefore it must have been inside the armour hall, and it must have occurred in the very brief period the door was open, between the time Lord Rayle was seen going in and the time he brushed out Massey and slammed the door. A very brief time, I insist. Had it occurred after the door was closed, Dr. Tairlaine would not have heard it at all. Moreover, it must have occurred very close to the door; otherwise the noise of the waterfall would have drowned it out.

“Very well. I kept these facts in mind, and went on.

“When we examined the body in the armour hall, as you noticed, I came upon several curious facts. The bone button and shirt-stud, gone from Lord Rayle in some sort of struggle, had been carefully placed in his pocket. Also, the body of the victim—which must have gone limp at the time of his death—had apparently been placed in that weird position before the statue. He had suffered a blow on the head, and injuries to his hip and thigh.

“When I tried to reconcile these inconsistencies, I was assisted by a remark you made, Mr. Steyne. It was, in effect, ‘Why the bowstring round his neck, if he were strangled with a pair of gauntlets? And why the funny position? It would seem that the murderer lifted him in the air, as though he were being hanged, and then let him fall down on his feet.’ . . . Gentlemen, that is precisely what happened.”

Sir George leaned forward. He said in a queer voice:

“You mean——?”

“I mean,” said Gaunt, “that Doris Mundo fell from a height, from a window. And so did Lord Rayle. Look at those long ends of the leather string, about the neck of a man weighing only ninety pounds, horribly like an unholy swing. Look at the bruises on him—only a few of them, as we discussed in the case of Doris, because he was dead and absolutely limp; but the fractured forehead, the injuries to hip and thigh, where he had landed on his *feet* and fallen forward into precisely that impossible position in which we found him. He was not placed in it at all. He landed that way.”

There was a faint, satiric smile on Gaunt's face as he sat back, lifting his brandy-glass. He went on:

"Thus two incongruities, the bowstring and the position, are explained; and the third incongruity—the button and the stud—only confirms our explanation. Why should the murderer pick these objects up and put them in his victim's pocket? They could do no harm where they lay. Apparently the murderer has wasted precious moments in finding them. If you will try the experiment of searching for your own dropped collar-stud or button in even a fairly light room, you will understand the fastidiousness of a murderer who gropes about the floor after them in almost complete darkness. . . . The only explanation is that Lord Rayle was not killed in the armour hall at all.

"Where was he killed, then, and why were they put into his pocket? Well, they had to be found near the dead man, to keep suspicion centred on the armour hall. The only explanation is our first: that he was dropped from a height—from a window. Clearly the murderer could not merely toss them over the rail; they would bounce heaven knows how many feet away. *But* if he put them in the pocket of the victim's robe before he dropped him, they were likely to fall out near the body. It was taking a chance, since the body could not be thrown down *on its head*; the murderer could risk no crushed skull, or even more injuries than were plausible, and so the killer had to try dropping it on its feet. . . ."

Sir George cried: "Then you mean he was really flung out of one of those windows in the armour hall?"

"Yes," Gaunt, answered placidly. "To be specific, from the window of his own bedroom. A body thrown from there would land a few feet from the outer base of the statue. . . ."

"But the dust, man!" Sir George protested, "the dust on the balcony——!"

"I didn't say he was thrown from the balcony. Those windows, now; what dimensions are they?"

"Well, say, seven or eight feet tall, and four feet broad."

"Quite so. And nearly four feet from the floor of the room, as well as the balcony floor. The railing of the balcony is about that high."

"I grant you," said the baronet, "that he was very light; but no man—even a man as strong as Massey—could stand inside the window of that room and throw a body over a window-sill four feet high, with even a narrow balcony beyond."

Gaunt raised an eyebrow at his glass. "I'm sorry, George. I tried to call it to your attention. I even went to the point of shouting it all over the castle when I spoke to Inspector Tape. . . . Oh, yes. A man could do just that—if he stood on a seventeenth-century chest, over five feet high, drawn up against the window. The chest was there, gentlemen. It had been obviously dragged away from that window—you saw its dust marks—to divert suspicion. And, when the murderer stood on it, he wiped its surface-top clean afterwards so that there should be no footmarks. That was a trifle too obvious. . . . But let me continue."

He drank off the tumbler; his eyes were growing bright and wintry, and his cheeks flushed.

"Thus I saw how it was done. Gentlemen, Lord Rayle died long before you thought he did. He was dead, and lying on the floor of the armour hall, *not later than fifteen minutes past nine.*"

Francis jumped up. "But, my God! Dr. Tairlaine saw——"

"I had already come to this conclusion, from reasons I have outlined," Gaunt said imperturbably. He turned to Tairlaine. "How are your eyes, Doctor?"

Tairlaine put a hand up to them bewilderedly. . . .

"But it doesn't matter," Gaunt went on. "It would have deceived a person with excellent eyesight, I fancy. Remember, you were sitting before a fireplace over thirty feet from the door of the armour hall. Your only illumination consisted of a few candles; the whole room was very dim, and the region of the armour-hall door—as we have several times pointed out—was in almost complete darkness. You saw somebody in a white robe, with a monk's cowl drawn over his head, hurry down that corridor—keeping to the wall, away from you—and dart in that door. It muttered, but it did not speak. It was a small man. . . ."

"You mean," Francis cried, "it was *Massey*?"

"My dear sir, we do not for the moment know who it

was. I am telling you my own thoughts as they came to me. But let us see who it must have been. I have told you why I thought Massey lied, and how I knew Lord Rayle must have been dead before nine-thirty. . . .

"Our figure darts in at the door, then—a door entirely in darkness. What is seen or heard? This figure, which is not Lord Rayle, disappears; a voice is heard speaking; and in the space of a minute, say, *Massey* comes out as the door slams. All this goes on in gloom, and is seen through the eyes of a gentleman with blurred vision, thirty feet away.

"We know it is an impostor. If this impostor darted in at the door, twitched off his robe, mumbled some words to himself, and—with his hand on the knob and his back turned so that his body concealed it—backed out again as he slammed the door. . . ."

"But he'd have to hide the robe," Francis protested. "He couldn't hide it, and he couldn't just chuck it down on the floor. We should have found it in either case. He couldn't do it."

"Oh, yes, he could," said Gaunt calmly, "*if he always carried a brief-case.*"

There was an abrupt and startled silence. Abstracted, smiling faintly, Gaunt glanced round the group.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," he said in an expostulating voice, "could I fail to realise that the significance of that *click* which was described to me? This library, as you have noticed, is a whispering gallery. Dr. Tairlaine even heard the figure's shoes squeak as it walked *too* hurriedly. . . . We have determined that this click was sounded close to the door. We have determined also that it occurred in the brief period the door was partly open, after the bogus Lord Rayle's entrance. It could be nothing but the click of a brief-case being snapped shut as the murderer stuffed his white robe inside."

"Well, I'm damned," Francis said flatly, after a long pause. He put a hand up to his forehead. "I'm thoroughly and completely damned. Neat! Devilish neat. . . . He had the brief-case held under his robe, then, when he ran in the door?"

"Yes. The robe—again as you must have noticed—was

always voluminous, so that it made Lord Rayle's tiny figure seem stocky. Mr. Massey, you saw, was not much taller; but the robe concealed his weight and very great strength. It was not necessary, really, in such dim light. But it was protection. . . .

"Massey, then, was our man. He came out, his robe in the brief-case; naturally, he was overwrought. He had performed a beautiful, simple, daring feat and he was practically flourishing the evidence in Dr. Tairlaine's face. But in his agitation he gave himself away.

"Gentlemen, I read you a long lecture to-day on the habits of liars. I told you how they could not help elaborating. If Massey, at that dangerous and critical emotional time, had neglected to spin a yarn, I should have been longer in tripping him. But he couldn't. He blurted out the first thing that came into his mind . . . and mentioned, damningly, the stolen pearls. Let me go on with that lead.

"Why, particularly, did he mention *pearls*? Since there had been a robbery, as we know, *before* even the actual time of Lord Rayle's death, why did his excited and inflamed imagination seize on the pearls? As compared with the bearer-bonds they were of insignificant value. What reason had he for remembering them particularly?—And the answer will lie in an examination of the facts in the death of Doris Mundo.

"Again let us work backwards. We were all concerned, when we heard the details, with the strange fact that the girl had been dropped from a window after her death. . . . You, George, wanted to know why she should have been thrown from her own bedroom window, while the gauntlets were left so conspicuously near the bed."

"I still do," said the baronet. "And what's the answer?"

"The answer," said Gaunt, "the answer is — she wasn't."

"I don't follow you."

Again Gaunt leisurely filled his glass. "You pointed out to me several times that she was dropped from a window," he replied. "I agreed with that. It was true. But when you said 'her bedroom window' I said nothing; I did not contradict you, because Massey was there at the time, and I did not care to put him on his guard. Look here."

He reached into his breast pocket, and drew out the plan of the castle.

"Here it is, George: It's been under your eyes all the time. You drew it. . . . Here," his finger travelled, "is the passageway to the kitchens. Here is the plan of the upper floor. You see the window in Doris's room. Whose window is directly opposite it?"

"Oh, Lord," said Francis. "You needn't show me. . . . Massey's room, of course."

"Massey's room," Gaunt agreed, "communicating with the office beside it. And—do you recall, I inquired particularly of Inspector Tape whether the window of Doris's room was open?"

"I do," said Francis, "and you did. Then Doris——"

"Why, Doris was strangled either in the office or in Massey's room and dropped from the window of the latter. Knowing then who the murderer was, I found the deduction not difficult. It would be a suspicious circumstance if the body were found to have been dropped from *his* window. Being as crookedly brilliant as he was, he simply manufactured evidence by . . . well?"

Sir George nodded.

"Yes," the baronet answered. "By pitching the gauntlets across into her room through the open window. They landed on the bed, and made no noise; but they slid off . . ."

"Quite so. The light was on, and he could see that nobody else was there. But for Mrs. Carter's caution in sending Annie Morrison to sleep in another room, he might have been in a dangerous hole. But—to save himself then, he was forced to throw away his weapons.

"She lay in the court, then, with the pearls in her hand. To understand Massey's conduct, and to place events in chronological order, we can now revert to those pearls again. Why were they on Massey's mind when he spoke to Dr. Tairlaine at a little past nine-thirty?"

"Query: was it because he had killed Doris Mundo at the same time he killed Lord Rayle? The answer: No. Disregarding medical evidence about the time of death, which is bound to be faulty in short-time diagnoses; disregarding this, I say, we still have good reason to believe other-

wise. . . . She was seen by Mr. Kestevan going into Lady Rayle's room in the vicinity of nine-thirty, and this is confirmed by Lady Rayle, who had a talk with her. In other words, she was definitely alive at a time when Massey must have been going downstairs to perform his impersonation of Lord Rayle. And, after the impersonation, Massey was for some time in the presence of witnesses. She was killed later.

"What, then, is the answer? In that one remark of Massey we deduce the whole series of events."

The eastern windows of the library were brightening now, and a sickly whiteness had stolen into corners. Sir George sat with his big hands clasped, weariness sealing down his eyelids. Throughout the whole recital, Inspector Tape had not spoken a word; he sat with notebook and pencil, occasionally nodding and making a notation. Francis was standing, lighting one cigarette after another. . . . Of all of them, Gaunt was the most easy. He might have been sitting, freshly groomed after dinner, and sampling the brandy.

He said: "We must agree that, in rifling both the office and Lord Rayle's bedroom, Massey necessarily looted the office first. I shall take up the details of his plan in a moment; but he was surprised robbing the safe in the bedroom, and that is why he had to kill Lord Rayle. Without interference, then, he finished with the office. We shall never know how the bonds and the necklace were disposed, between the two safes, but it is of no consequence.

"We know, then, that about nine-thirty, more or less, Doris Mundo visited Lady Rayle. At this time Dr. Manning was outside looking at his car. Leaving Lady Rayle's room, without consolation and after the briefest of interviews, Doris—in returning to her own quarters—had to pass along the covered balcony outside the rooms of both Lord and Lady Rayle. And, as she passed his bedroom door . . .

"What did she see? The flashlight of the murderer inside, through the window? Massey himself, leaving the room, his brief case containing the loot, and the damning monk's robe he wore to impersonate Lord Rayle? We are on purely speculative grounds, of course. But under the circumstances we must assume that she stumbled on some-

thing which gave the whole show away. It is improbable that she witnessed the murder, or even the body being tossed down. But she met Massey.

“Under any other circumstances, knowing what was going on, she might have betrayed him instantly. It was Massey who had seduced her, and got her with child—we shall examine that phase presently—and the girl was desperate. For some time she had been threatening to tell; that was why he determined on this quick and complete robbery at the time he did, because the doctor had discovered her condition that very afternoon, and he was not safe a moment. He has been driven to murder; and she comes on him unexpectedly at the scene of the crime. The girl is desperate. Whatever happens, she will lose her situation. She may or may not have been willing to go so far as robbery. We do not know. But Massey is aware she has not sufficient strength of will to keep up a deception if she has guilty knowledge of a murder.

“What did he say to her, in that ghastly moment? He must have been frantic. What he wants now is *time*—time to adjust himself to this new crisis. Once before, as you shall see, his plan was almost spoiled; it is to be spoiled again. But now he blurts out something. He wildly tells her to be silent. At any moment, he knows, somebody may discover the body in the armour hall below, before he has time to prepare an alibi. He must hurry on with his deception at once. The first thing that occurs to him . . . the pearls. He snatches them from his pocket and puts them into her hands. Let her go to his room, and await him there. He will return, and they will plan to go away together. But above all things he urges her to stay out of sight . . . and, while she goes to his room, he goes down for his impersonation.”

Gaunt's pipe had gone out again, and he relit it.

“Let us recapitulate, now.

“I asked you before, and I ask you again, whether you realise even at this point the real nature of the man. You have seen him going stolidly about his business. You have believed him to be as unemotional as that clock he smashed when he went down. But it amused me to watch the real nature of the man when I knew he was guilty.

"In front of you, he was such an *obviously* bad liar; he let you all see it. He was so obviously unimaginative. He had an imagination of the methodical, Teutonic kind, and he concealed it admirably. I remember once, George, you said that the ten thousand pounds might have been stolen as a blind, to hide the real purpose of the murderer. You said that, and he answered, 'Nobody steals ten thousand pounds merely as a blind,'—which, according to his own temperament, was quite true. He spoke not with irony at telling the exact truth, but out of his own soul. And you replied, 'Oh, for God's sake, use some imagination!'

"He hated his yoke. He hated being dependent on a testy, slightly mad, and always unreasonable employer. I fancy that for some time he had meditated robbery, but I question whether he would have put it into execution if circumstances had not compelled him to do so. There was always an immense sum in bearer-bonds, there at hand . . ."

"But how could he have disposed of them?" demanded Sir George. "The serial numbers; people would have the serial numbers, and——"

"Not exactly, you see." Gaunt nodded vacantly. "He was Lord Rayle's secretary. You would have the serial numbers he gave you."

Francis said: "You mean that the serial numbers he gave us——"

"Were bogus, of course. Isn't it beautifully simple? You change a figure here and there, and you throw both solicitors and bank into such confusion that they will not trace the bonds for some time . . . until, at least, you could cash in on them. If you are ever questioned, you have the very credible reply that it was the notoriously crazy Lord Rayle who provided you with the numbers. Almost anything could be believed of a man who writes the combination of his safe on the wall beside it. Furthermore, who would think of robbery in connection with the secretary? For several years he has complete control over a madman's affairs, and has served him faithfully. When the madman is loose with his safe-combinations, who is to blame the secretary if some member of the household burgles the strong-boxes?

“ But robbery will necessitate the murder of Lord Rayle. He will have the real numbers. This will necessitate blaming the murder on some member of the household—a comparatively easy thing, but dangerous. I fancy that for some time Massey meditated plans. But he had that sort of brain which is cautious at precisely the right time, and hideously quick and daring when action is necessary. He would weigh slowly, and walk with care, until he found himself in difficulties that required deadly swiftness and ingenuity.

“ And he did get into difficulties; he discovered that Doris Mundo was pregnant. For some time he had been able to keep her quiet. You see now who stole the gauntlets, and why? To terrify her superstitious nature; to pose on the staircase, and threaten her with God knows what supernatural punishments if she revealed her ‘ sin.’ Why he stole the bowstring we shall never know. But I fancy that swinging it in those gauntleted hands in the moonlight, like a hangman’s noose, further to terrify her—well, it might have been effective.

“ Two nights ago he knew his secret was out. The girl had hysterics; the doctor was summoned; and he was aware that eventually she would tell. At that point I think he dropped all notion of murdering Lord Rayle, and certainly he would not have strangled Doris merely to prevent discovery of an illegitimate child. That would be insane, and it was not necessary. All he wished to do was loot his employer’s safe and get enough to carry him out of the country. He was playing then for a ridiculously small stake, but your true criminal never neglects to pick up pennies.

“ He was already laying his plans when Dr. Tairlaine and George arrived at the castle. . . . Didn’t he carefully inform you of Lord Rayle’s vagaries about the safe combinations? Didn’t he stress the man’s eccentricities, and call attention several times to the letters he had to write that night? . . . Ah, I thought so. When I have been present, I’ve noticed that he never failed to mention matters like these. It was not necessary, you see; it was bad taste; it was not like him—if he had had no purpose behind it.

“ The letters were all prepared, of course. When he left you after dinner, he made certain that Lord Rayle, if he

came upstairs at all, would not come until later in the evening. In all probability, Lord Rayle would not venture upstairs; he would be too concerned with showing Dr. Tairlaine his armour collection. He had heard Rayle tell the doctor to wait for him in the library, whatever happened. Thus Massey reasoned, and on any other night in the year he would have been correct.

"Complete chance upset all the apples, you see. For Lord Rayle had chosen that, of all nights, to build a 'rabbit-hutch.' He had nailed up the door by which his daughter had been keeping tryst with Mr. Kestevan. And naturally he wanted to see the success of his joke. Who told him of their affair we do not know; probably Lady Rayle . . ."

Francis growled something, and Gaunt regarded him amusedly.

"What, therefore, did he naturally do? He allowed Patricia ample time to go upstairs and change her frock; he waited carefully until he was certain she had gone into the armour hall. And then——?"

"I see," Sir George said thoughtfully. "He left us taking coffee in the drawing-room, slipped out into the Great Hall, and went straight down to the armour hall."

"Exactly. Meantime, Patricia had concealed herself in the armour hall; she was down at the far end, hidden by the darkness and the cases, and wondering why the door behind the tapestry would not open.

"Lord Rayle slipped in. She did not see him. But *he* saw something which startled him more than what he had expected to see . . ."

"Well?" Sir George demanded.

"He saw a light in the window of his bedroom," said John Gaunt.

CHAPTER XIX

SOLUTION

"MASSEY was there," the detective went on quietly, "with his flashlight, and he was indiscreet in showing it. Lord Rayle knew that, whoever was in his room, that person was

there for no good. Nobody was ever allowed in his room, as you have heard. Perhaps he did not suspect burglars; perhaps he thought it a curious housemaid. But he did not wait. He hurried to investigate.

“Well, he came upon Massey robbing his safe.”

Francis was staring straight ahead, the fire of his cigarette burning down against his fingers.

“And then,” Francis muttered, “Massey killed him . . .”

“As I have indicated to you. Yes. I cannot believe that such an ingenious plan was conceived on the spur of the moment; I believe, as I told you, Massey had long meditated it. But he had never really intended to put it into practice. Perhaps he may have so intended, later that night; he had the bowstring with him. But he had to work rapidly.

“Now his whole scheme was changed. Previously, he had intended a robbery which should go unnoticed until the next day, when he could make his escape. Now he wanted an obvious robbery, and the murder fastened on the obvious person.

“Had he known it, he ran a hideous chance. Patricia was down in the hall where he let the body fall . . . but Patricia was concealed behind the tapestry, and saw nothing. Nor did she hear anything when the body struck; too often have you reminded me of the noise of that waterfall, once a person is past the centre of the hall.

“You know the rest. Doris Mundo came upon him; he dashed the pearls into her hand and went downstairs. He knew now that he must kill her too; inevitably she must betray him. He got his opportunity, as otherwise he would have manœuvred it, when he took Patricia upstairs. He saw her to her room; then he hurried to his own room, where Doris was waiting. It was all over in a few minutes. Perhaps it was a mistake for him to put the pearls into her hand, as a hint that she too was concerned in the robbery. But the body went out of the window, under cover of the gramophone's noise, and the gauntlets were flung across the open passage. All that remained was to create a mess in the office . . .”

“Why ransack the office?” Francis inquired. “Didn't you say he'd already robbed it?”

"His plan had changed, you see. He wanted an obvious robbery now; he didn't intend to make an escape—why should he? Now he could note down his fake serial numbers for the bonds, and execute a scheme he had long cherished. I question whether even such a clever man could think so quickly as he did, if he had not long meditated just such a course. He knocks books and pictures about—quite unnecessarily—and throws the pearl-case conspicuously on the floor.

"The finished design is all but complete. It is murder now, definitely, and he knows where to put the blame: on Francis Steyne. That was undoubtedly when he went back to your room, Mr. Steyne, and stole the automatic. He had thrown away his own weapons, and he still had dangerous work ahead for the night. He was coolly desperate, with a light-swift brain; and, if he ran into danger, he would put you still deeper into suspicion."

"Dangerous work?" Francis asked.

"He had to do two things. He had to hide his loot, for the moment concealed in his room. Finally, he had to take the robe he had worn in his impersonation of Lord Rayle back to its closet."

Slowly Gaunt turned to Tairlaine.

"You understand now, Doctor, what was different about the closet when you viewed it next morning? There were six robes hanging there, instead of five; and—as I told you—one of them was wrinkled beyond recognition from being stuffed into his brief-case. There he met Lady Rayle, with the result you know."

"And the bonds?"

"You often played Hunt the Slipper here, didn't you? . . . Mr. Steyne, you and your sister were discussing that fact only this morning."

"Yes, certainly; but . . ."

"And where did she say *you* always hid the slipper?"

"Why, in one of the suits of armour."

Gaunt brought his fist down on the arm of the chair. "Exactly. And rest assured Massey knew it, as the rest of the house did. He wanted to hide his loot where *you* would have hidden it, in case anything went wrong with his scheme.

Do you see? That was why I said the trap I intended to lay was based on his efforts to throw suspicion on you."

There was a rumbling noise. Inspector Tape was clearing his throat. For some time they had forgotten him, and they were vaguely surprised when he hitched out his chair. He said:

"Excuse me, sir. That's the part of it I want to know about. You told me what to do, and I did it; you told me where to place me men, and I did that . . . But what was it all about? . . . I mean to say, sir: you spoke to me out in the Great 'All to-day . . ."

"So that Massey could hear," said Gaunt drowsily. "Quite so."

" . . . and you said you'd found something in the pocket of one of 'is lordship's robes. A piece of paper, you said, with figures on it—the numbers of bonds. I'll take me oath there wasn't no such thing there."

"There wasn't," said Gaunt, "until I put it there."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Will you pass me that bottle, Sir George? . . . Thank you. Why, Inspector, I had to prove it on him, you see. When I said I had found a piece of paper inscribed with the serial numbers of bonds, in Lord Rayle's writing, I knew I should have Massey terrified. He would be afraid Rayle had written down the *real* numbers. Already I had said to him that I intended sending telegrams to the solicitor and the bank, and he was afraid his hand might be forced. His natural instinct would be to get that piece of paper and discover whether his fears were true. To do this, he would have to compare these numbers with the real ones, on the hidden bonds."

"There was a chance that he might not take the bait. There was a chance that, stealing the paper I had prepared, he might destroy it without comparing it with the real bonds. . . . I took the precaution to sprinkle talcum powder in the closet, so that we should have footprints; but they would scarcely have been very condemning if he did not lead us straight to where the bonds were hidden. But he did. He had to wait until night, because I had carefully kept a man on guard in both rooms during the day; but he walked into our parlour very amicably."

"I'm sorry he lost his head at the last moment," Gaunt added slowly, after a long pause. "He would have put up an admirable defence in the dock."

His pipe was out. The full morning light flooded this old, tired room now. Sir George sat with his head in his hands. Francis was staring at the end of his cigarette. Tairlaine, sinking into drowsiness, saw Gaunt rise and walk to throw open an eastern window. He stood there motionless while the sun grew brilliant on the sea, and, besides the waterfall, there was no noise in the ancient house save the slow, unhurrying, implacable footfalls of the police constable pacing up and down the hall.

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